Prologue

1

Cumulonimbus clouds stretched from the gleaming ocean into the cerulean sky.

Due to the sunlight’s reflection, the asphalt road that followed the shoreline sparkled with a white glow.

Beneath the railing, translucent waves could be seen rolling in. I think, it must be very comfortable to jump in. But right now, I am currently holding on to this phone.

“How’s it going over there?”

I said, as I heard the nearly weeping voice of my colleague on the other end of the line – although she's just a colleague from work.

“Even with an air-conditioner, it's still hot as hell. What about your place?”

“I thought it'd be cooler since we're further North, but apparently not.”

Noto-peninsular’s summer, is really summer.

“That’s so disappointing –” a cheerful laugh came through the receiver.

“It’s even hotter than Tokyo, right?”

“Exactly!”

“But if you're by the sea, can’t you go swimming? It'd feel completely different from swimming in a pool.”

“Yeah, in theory. But that won't happen, cause four of us can't swim.”

Of all our members, one is currently hospitalized. As for the 3 others, due to their injuries, it would probably hurt a lot if they bathed in seawater.

“What the heck is Bou-san doing, being so pathetic this time; he should just swim from the start.”

“They all look exhausted. Although their stitches were just removed, I’ve heard that they should still refrain from swimming. Because of lingering wrist pain, work is also cancelled. John is apparently already better, but – ”

“Poor things. I want to see them.”

“Are you coming?”

“If I’m sponsored, I’ll go.”

“Ah? … Ha ha.”

“A-ah, as a poor person, I have no sympathy. I hate myself for having dealt with all the clothes, cakes etc that were for visiting Bou-san in hospital.”

“Forget it, there’s no use regretting. That's just you.”

“You bastard. – What about the boss?”

“He should be discharged in 2 to 3 days; we’ll know after his check-up today.”

“Mai – I think even if he isn’t hospitalized, the boss still won’t put on a swimsuit and go swimming.”

“Yeah yeah.”

“You're lucky, you can look after him hand and foot.”

“What-whatever! Ayako and Masako are the ones that hover over him like a shadow!”

“If that's the truth, then what are you doing every day?”

“I’m looking after Bou-san.”

“You're so cunning!” Came an extra-loud voice from the receiver. I hurriedly pulled the receiver away from my ear. That bastard, why was she so loud.

“I’m joking; I’m doing an assignment now.”

“What? Did you bring your homework there?”

“The hotel lady sent it to me, and all the answers are correct. And Yasuhara's here too.”

“Yasuhara broke his ribs, so he couldn’t possibly bathe in the ocean.”

“Of course. Thanks to you, I’ve gained a free-of-charge home tutor.”

“You're a rude bastard without any manners – you’ll have to treat me when you get back.”

“Yeah, it’s all right if it’s an ice cream cone.”

“Bastard, you're such a bully – only ice-cream?!”

“Grr… you’re gonna do what?”

“Whatever, don’t you have a special subsidy? Just treat it as a special treatment for me; I'll wait until your pay day.”

“Ha-ah, landlord-sama, thank you for your leniency.”

“Don’t be such a pain! I’m looking forward to that day. I’ll stop here today. Talk to ya later!”

“Take care!”

“I’ll take care of the things at home; I’m leaving the casualties to you!”

“Okay, bye-bye!”

Replacing the receiver, the green colored telephone ejected my phone-card and beeped. The cicadas, which were even louder than this, were also crying non-stop.

I, Taniyama Mai, am a second year high school student.

The reason a student in a Tokyo high school like me is here in Noto is more or less because of work. I hold the title of "investigator", even though I can't really do anything.

Now that it was summer, I had originally thought it’d be fun to travel far away from Tokyo (to Noto). But in the end, we kept getting casualties, and because of the boss’s hospitalization, we remained in Noto even though our investigation ended already.

Too bad for the restaurant that we investigated to provide lodgings. And that explains why I'm just wandering around, waiting for my boss to be discharged. Before I knew it, half a month had already gone by, and my summer holidays were drawing to a close.

Coming out from the telephone booth, I was scanning for shade as I walked along the shore, when I heard the sound of a car horn.

Lifting my head, I could see a car coming over slowly.

“Oh, are you here to visit the hospital?”

I could see the silhouettes of 3 people – a male and two females, the former or which stuck his head out from the driver’s seat.

2

The man who stepped out was the monk, as Takahashi mentioned, was – Romeo Takigawa Hou-sou, aka Bou-san.

Originally from Mount Takano, he currently works at some studio. And even though I'm saying all this, I've never met that side of Bou-san ever before. Although Takahashi had shown me many CDs printed with ‘Norio Takigawa’ on the cover, I’m still incapable of linking those two people together.

“Mai! Naru can be discharged. I’m going to pack the bags now, do you want to come too?”

“I’m coming!”

Actually, we really don't need that many people to go handle the discharge procedure. But Bou-san’s car has an air-conditioner. And I'd much rather ride in an air-conditioned car than walk back in the unbearable heat. We'll just drive to the hospital, and then drive back. Hey, this is the best way to do it.

“The heat is killing me!” The woman beside me complained loudly as I sat down in the backseat.

“Are you an idiot? You deliberately travel that far on a hot day like today, just to go to a phone booth to make a phone call.”

“But I have to call the office, and there are no public phones where we stay.”

“That store can't be that heartless; you just need to borrow the phone.”

“Mai and Ayako are different; she is not brave, and borrowing other's phones to make long-distance calls isn’t easy either. Not that going so far just to use a phone booth is any better.”

It was at least 10 minute walk from the lodgings.

“I rudely borrowed a phone from someone?”

“There’s no such thing. I think it’s Ayako who doesn’t know manners or perhaps her skin is thicker (tl/n: less easily embarrassed).”

“- Mai, tonight you must tell me fully what you said over the phone!”

“No way!” With that I punched Bou-san, but only lightly.

Ayako is Matsuzaki Ayako. She’s a self-proclaimed priestess, but a priestess made up so garishly was beyond my imagination; she’s also very cool. You could say she has a dynamic personality. However, she donated a lot of clothes to the parentless me, who is unable to wear those high quality clothes. That’s why I say, she’s a sharp tongued, soft hearted big sister. She always says, “This clothing suits you very well, it doesn’t fit me” and what not. In a line, to be able to be with Ayako like this is also some sort of fate.

Ayako looked at Bou-san and I and couldn’t stop laughing secretly on one side.

Masako’s full name is Hara Masako. She is a medium who frequently appears on Wideshow and other similar programs. She, clearly, like me, is just the age of a high-school student, but the difference between us is so great, this fellow! She’s currently infatuated with the boss of ‘Shibuya Psychic Research (SPR)’ – our boss. I heard she cried because she had to go back to Tokyo to record a program.

“Apparently it was Naru who wanted to be discharged!”

“He requested to be discharged?” I turned back to look at Masako.

What in the world is he thinking of, that young master! Naru, who I’ve called ‘Naru’ from the first, and who I call ‘Naru-chan’ affectionately now, is our boss who opened his own offices in Shibuya at age seventeen. Towards the older people he always wears an apathetic look; his personality is also terrible. Summing it up it’s a look of supreme arrogance and omnipotence.

“If he’s so willful, he’ll die young.”

“Well said.”

“Forget it, it’s not like that fellow Naru’s willfulness started today.” Ayako opened her mouth to speak.

“And it’s not like he has to create trouble for others, furthermore it’s not only because there’s something wrong with his own body. If Naru does this then isn’t it not wrong?” Although the words are a little too much, they are indeed the truth.

3

“That body of his isn’t very study either; it’s better to pay a little more attention to the state of his body.”

“Naru’s weakness should be due to his use of Qi Gong, his previous hospitalizations were also due to this; if he doesn’t use Qi Gong, he should have any problems temporarily, should he?”

“As to this I don’t know, at first I even thought it was leukemia or something, it shocked me to death. So Qi Gong is Naru’s secret.”

“What illness, and it doesn’t have any symptoms… you’re talking about that soap opera from a few years back, right?”

Really, the number of secrets that young master has is really numerous; while it is a matter of course that one wants to keep things hidden, but…

I smiled. “Bou-san, why are you so quiet?”

“Ah?”

“Normally you’ll talk when you’re driving.”

Bou-san glanced into the rearview mirror and smiled bitterly, “even I have times when I think about things!”

“I know. Are you thinking that because work is on temporary hiatus, your living expenses haven’t been dealt with yet?”

“Right right. And there’s the fuel cost for going back, what will I do… hey hey, there’s no such possibility, right?!”

“Is that wrong?”

“Hn, is money the only thing I can think about?”

“Speaking of which, Bou-san hasn’t been very energetic recently.”

“It’s not being unenergetic, it’s thinking about things; that’s very manly, right?”

“As if. This look doesn’t suit you at all.”

“You wench!”

“It’s unrelated, right? Tired yet?”

“Continuously babysitting children is exhausting; I’d consider myself to have experienced the sensation of a teacher leading a school tour – it’s just like Bou-san has been these few days.”

“Young children? Who is a young child here?”

“As for this – who do you think it is?”

Che~ That’s not cute at all.

But the kindhearted me, who had seldom seen Bou-san space out like this, was still worried. Furthermore, the investigation this time around was really exhausting, and Bou-san was even injured – he had 15 stitches on his back.

The other 2 people who remained in the lodgings were similarly injured.

Yasuhara, whose full name is Yasuhara Osamu. This spring, he breezed through his examinations with outstanding results, and is already a university student at a famous university. We encountered him because he had previously made a job request, in the end he became the muscle of the company. This time he even broke his ribs, and is still currently wearing a plaster cast. And during the long awaited relaxing summer break too! Sigh! Poor fellow!

The other is John, whose full name is John Brown. A priest from Australia, John had also endured many injuries – his body is covered with stitched up wounds. Although he isn’t as badly injured as Yasuhara and Bou-san, it is serious enough.

This was a rare visit to the seaside, but the 3 men couldn’t swim. Besides, if there were 3 females looking after Naru it were already more than enough. Just like this we gathered together every day to gossip, sigh! I can’t help feeling it’s a waste of this summer vacation.

Just as I was thinking this, the tall building could already be seen directly in front of us. The building that towered over the other buildings surrounding it

was the hospital where boss is staying at.

Entering the entrance hall, I saw Lin-san at the reception area.

Lin-san's name is Lin Koujo. Based on his name I think he should be a China man, or more precisely he was born in Hong Kong. I'm not sure whether to call him an investigator in Shibuya Psychic Research or the boss's secretary. Ma~ He is just this type of fellow. Apparently he even knows Chinese Witchcraft techniques – this I know from the things he had done. He is an uncommunicative sort of character. As to why this type of person is working in SPR, I do not know.

Lin-san was making a payment at the reception.

"Yo, are you settling the bill and handling the discharge?" Although Bou-san was greeting Lin-san, his gaze was fixed at his hands.

As a poor person I also couldn't help looking over. From a distance of 2 to 3 meters I could see a rather thick wad of cash; if it were only 3 or 5 notes, it shouldn't look that thick; it should be the hospital fee from Naru's family. If it's like this, then he is, as expected, a young master from a rich family.

"Is he really getting discharged? Is he alright already?"

"Naru requested it himself." Although his tone is still very cold, he is making a reply, and that's an enormous improvement already. Recently I've been able to converse with Lin-san, although the conversations are all very short.

I secretly asked Ayako, "Ne, is hospitalization so expensive?"

Ah, Ayako nodded her head.

"Furthermore it appears that Naru doesn't have insurance."

- Gei, that fellow.

"Are you lying? Is that fellow paying the full fee out of pocket?" If he had brought along his insurance policy, if he had National Health Insurance, he would only need to pay 30%. That is to say, in reality the victim would only need to pay 30% of the bill, the country would shoulder 70%. If the doctor's bill were 3000 yen, the actual fee would be 1000 yen.

"The cost of just a single bed is 10 000 a night. Without insurance, the treatment cost would add up to tens of thousands." On that note, Ayako's family

runs hospitals.

“That’s really scary; clearly with health insurance it’d be decreased by a lot.”

“What about you? As for poor people, it’s still better to take good care of your body!”

“Mind your own business!”

Although Ayako’s words are quite brash, I know she is being concerned for me.

In the midst of our conversation, Lin-san had finished settling the bill, so we walked together towards the wards, and said farewell to the doorman whom we had already gotten familiar with.

The room labeled ‘Shibuya Kazuya’ was his room. After gently knocking on the door we opened it and entered. The patient wore a hospital gown and sat on the bed looking at documents. That document was a record for work – he’s a 17 year old workaholic.

Upon hearing Lin-san’s voice, Naru closed the file.

“Ah.”

He looks like he’s in a very bad mood; his color is also very poor.

When Naru collapsed during the investigation, he nearly stopped breathing. Lin-san and Bou-san performed mouth to mouth resuscitation on him; the paramedics who rushed there had said he was in trouble, and he even entered the emergency room. It really made one feel he had a very narrow escape. He was already like that, is it really all right to get discharged now? If he hasn’t really recovered, the doctors should have stopped him from getting discharged.

Ayako brought the fruits that were prepared and went to greet the doctors and nurses; Lin-san packed the bags; Masako made tea; while I leaned against the wall looking on.

Despite this, in the end everyone still stayed behind.

Naru was hospitalized for 6 days. While it was a matter of course that Lin-san stayed behind to protect Naru, even the other fellows who should have had other jobs scheduled had also stayed behind. Could they possibly be that free – or were they concerned about Naru? He’s clearly a willful and secretive fellow.

But didn’t I also stay behind? As expected I still worry about this fellow.

The last time he was hospitalized he refused to accept visitors, but this time he didn’t say so, perhaps there is a reason on this side I can’t be sure. Originally we only came here because of the investigation; furthermore this time it was even more severe than the last, therefore we were this worried that we didn’t return first. Perhaps even Naru would feel insecure?

- This shouldn’t be possible.

I even thought he would be like the last time and unhesitatingly say “With you lot visiting I’m not able to sleep, you’re getting in the way!” Has his heart changed slightly, does he know gratitude now? – Sigh! Such a thing shouldn’t be possible.

I also don’t know whether Naru’s family knows of Naru’s hospitalization. During the period of his hospitalization not once have I seen a visiting relative. Under normal circumstances, if the son is hospitalized, the mother would come at least. Yasuhara’s well tempered mother had come. But no one from Naru’s family came; it’s like they weren’t contacted at all. Thinking about it, it’s quite incomprehensible.

Naru’s father is apparently a University Professor, a researcher in the paranormal. But is there this type of teachers in University? While his mother is apparently around, as to what type of person she is I don’t know, but I don’t think she’s a normal mother. Otherwise she’d definitely be very angry to see her son not attend school and open a psychic research company instead.

- But… up till now she hasn’t appeared in the hospital.

I don’t know if they are unaware of Naru’s hospitalization? Such a possibility shouldn’t exist, right? Even if they silently accept their son’s suspicious behavior of starting a company to be a ghost hunter, but he hasn’t returned for such a long period of time, could they possibly not think it strange?

It’s really such a puzzle!

Where is his home? What type of home is his home like? Does he have brothers? As to Naru’s situation, there’s nothing that I know of. Even I have

started feeling frustrated; he is really an exceedingly secretive person.

“Naru-chan, can we send these things away?”

“Have you forgotten anything? Have you said goodbye to the doctors?” I smiled.

At a time like this everyone was like a temporarily put together family.

Bou-san is the father, Ayako is the mother, Lin is the picky grandfather. The broadminded eldest son and the steady, reliable second son are John and Yasuhara. The carefree and precocious daughters are me and Masako. And Naru is the willful youngest son (although he is slightly older than me). Look, it’s really very suiting.

“You’re still grinning stupidly by yourself over there; hurry up and help out!” My head was knocked a few times – it was Bou-san.

“Put this in the car.”

“Got it, Dad!”

“Haah??” I smile secretly as it’s a secret! I’m not telling you, Bou-san!

Chapter 1

1

On the second day, we left Noto.

After that we had to pass through the Japanese Archipelago to return to Tokyo. Annoying! I hate driving back; it was too painful.

There are 2 roads from Noto to Tokyo, the North Road and the South Road. When we came, we took the winding, mountainous South road, when we returned it was via the North road, which was from Hokubo to Matsumoto, passing north of Niigata.

“Oh whatever!” Ayako grumbled continuously in the car. “That fellow who only cares about looks!”

Ayako’s displeasure had started when we set off.

Because Bou-san’s car is a normal car, it definitely could not seat (more than) 5 people. Although the company vehicle is a van, it was filled with equipment etc and could only seat 3 people. We had a total of 8 people, so theoretically there shouldn’t have been a problem.

If the company vehicle was to be driven by Lin-san, it was a matter of course that Naru would accompany him. Following that came the problem: who would take the last seat in the company vehicle?

At a time like this, Ayako thought she should have been given special treatment. But Masako had already sat on the seat. Just like that the 2 began quarrelling.

The problem was solved very easily; in the end Masako ended up sitting there.

That’s why Ayako's in such a foul mood now.

“Right, right, don’t be angry any more. Naru might not necessarily want to sit with a beauty in a car.”

“Oh, that's him alright. If there’s a pretty girl he’ll definitely pick her!”

Yes, yes.

“Isn’t it because Hara-san is the most petite?” John said.

“Right, right. It’s definitely because it’s still a little tight with 3 persons seated, that’s why he chose to go with the smaller Hara-san.”

Because it’d take a month for Yasuhara’s wound to heal, he took the passenger seat. John and I were seated on either side of Ayako.

“Ah la, do you mean to say that Masako is thinner than I am?” If your heights are different, your body shape would definitely be different too. Despite thinking like this, I held my tongue. Because everyone still couldn’t shut their mouths, the cramped car was continuously very noisy.

“There’s no such thing!”

“No? Then I see it’s Masako who has grasped Naru’s weakness, hence Naru’s continuous acceptance of Masako’s bullying.”

“Is it really like that? With that impossibly outstanding fellow?”

And I’ve never heard Naru say whether he had received help from Masako, neither has he said that he didn’t need her help or words to that effect.

“Forget it, don’t be so tense.”

“Shut up!”

Even if it’s you, it won’t do.

“ – Wait, are you dozing off while you’re driving? How can you let that car in front overtake us?”

Ayako reproached Bou-san slightly hysterically.

“You fellow, didn’t you see the yellow line?” Bou-san complained.

“I’ve seen it, that’s the overtaking lane!”

Ayako on a rampage is unbeatable; only poison-tongued Naru can control her now. I glanced back slightly; I could feel the mini-van behind us giving off a hate filled glare.

“Then what do you want to do?”

When Bou-san just finished, Ayako stretched from the backseat to the front to madly sound the horn.

“You! Don’t you know this is very dangerous?”

“That’s too outrageous!”

“Ayako-san!”

Just like this a din started inside the car again.

Just like this, this type of reckless driving continued unceasingly for 6 hours; when we realized, we had already driven to some other place.

2

“Where is this place?”

“You make a din non-stop like that in the car; in that circumstance how can one look at the road signs?”

“You directionless imbecile!”

“Do you want to walk back from here?”

Because we had gotten lost, everyone started arguing again. We had taken a shortcut back, but the road had suddenly narrowed and gradually became a gavel path. We had completely stuck between a rock and a hard place. The moment the car stopped, everyone started arguing again.

Masako sighed gently.

“I think, because the car did not follow Matsuzaki-san’s directions, that’s why we have ended up in such a strange place.”

“Masako, if you know what to do, then say so.”

“Lin-san is already pressing his horn, asking if there are any routes nearby.”

Bou-san appeared a little defeated.

“Regardless, we have to get back to the highway first.”

Yasuhara opened the map and said,

“There’s no space for the car to make a u-turn.”

“If we continue to drive on straight like this, there’ll be a campsite, and from there we can return to the highway.”

“It looks like that’s our only choice.”

- But, I did not imagine such an unexpected situation to occur. This should be

what they call a bolt from the blue.

It was a small incident that became an unexpectedly major event. I don't quite know how to explain, but this incident changed my life.

While taking a wrong turn was an unexpected situation, if we could backtrack and return to our original road, it wouldn't be that bad. However, the situation had not ended yet.

This time Lin-san led the party, via the gravel path, to the campsite by the river. If we continued like this we could go back, but at this time, the car in front suddenly stopped.

"What's up?"

"Are we lost again?"

Bou-san asked while he stopped the car; Yasuhara looked at the map again.

"It shouldn't be wrong again." Looking out of the car, Naru got off the vehicle in front.

Ayako frowned.

"Could he be uncomfortable again? It's that idiot Bou-san's fault for driving onto this type of road."

"Whose fault should it be that we're on this type of road?"

I hurriedly got off the car. Is he really uncomfortable again? Now's not the time to argue over those minor things.

Naru stood by the railing.

Below us was a relatively large lake; or rather than calling it a lake, it should be a reservoir; in the distance I could see the concrete dyke.

"Naru, are you all right?"

Naru did not answer me; he did not even turn his head. He merely gazed at the scenery ahead.

Lin-san also hurried down from the car and ran to Naru's side.

"What's up?"

There was still no answer, it was as though my voice and Lin-san's voice could not reach Naru's ears.

As though he was confirming something, Naru opened his eyes wide and looked at the scenery in front of him.

Very strange; what exactly was happening?

"Naru?"

It was only to have Naru gently bend forward; the fingers grasping the rail turned slightly white. Standing by the side, Lin-san gasped in astonishment.

"Is this the place?"

????? What does this mean? I was a little lost already.

Naru's lips moved.

He mumbled to himself, as though to calm himself down.

" – Finally – I've finally found it – "

3

What exactly had happened?

When I was spacing out, Naru and Lin-san returned to their vehicle, and we hurriedly returned to the car. Because we were in separate cars, I couldn't ask anything even if I wanted to while we were driving. The company vehicle in front of us returned to the campsite we had passed by just now.

Not only that, Naru actually declared he wanted to stay here, giving us all a shock.

"What exactly happened?"

"I have something to do here, go back to Tokyo Mai." Naru said coolly, and without any explanation.

"Go back? But…"

We looked at each other; I can't possibly go back like this! At the very least you should tell me what you are going to do here.

"You'll only get in my way here; go back!"

You you you! I've been crisply rejected.

As he said, we could only go back, but…

"Is Naru going back too?"

"I don't know!"

"You don't know? Then what's going to happen to the office in the mean time?"

It was clear that up till now, the office was already in business. Takahashi alone took care of it.

In the end, Naru's reply shocked even me.

"Then close it, tell Takahashi-san that!"

"Clo-close it??"

If the boss wasn't around we couldn't perform any investigations. We couldn't cancel the phone line, couldn't read the mail. That's why up till now, all Takahashi did was explain to the customers. But even doing this was very different from closing the office.

"Mai should also go and look for somewhere else to work."

Ai????

"Close that office once you get back."

Ah!!!!

In an instance a huge panic descended upon my heart.

"Close the office?"

"If it closes does it mean we don't do business anymore?"

"W… why?"

"You have to explain!"

"Naru!"

Naru frowned and raised his hand.

"I can hear you even if you don't get angry; can't you calm down a little?"

"Then answer my question."

I raised my hand.

"Does closing the shop mean that we're ceasing business? Why?"

"I have something I have to do."

"Boss, then explain this thing. I'm being fired by you now; I have, at least, the right to know the reason."

"I don't feel there is any necessity to explain."

You bastard, you actually say there is no necessity!

Just as I had decided to get angry, Bou-san, who had been spacing out, spoke loudly.

“Forget it! I admit defeat!”

“Ai?”

“I’m saying I’ve been defeated by this summer day. There’re only these simple wooden huts here, let’s help this fellow who wants to stay here then!”

Looking at our stunned faces, Naru spoke harshly.

“Bou-san, you doing so will only get in my way.”

“You have a situation, and we’ve all heard so. Is everyone going back?”

“I’m staying.”

Yasuhara raised his hand and spoke; John did the same.

“What about you, Masako?”

“I’d always planned to stay.”

Bou-san nodded.

“Then what about Mai and Ayako?”

I glanced at Ayako, who glanced back.

“What should we do, Mai?”

“What should we do? I…”

Naru had told me go back so calmly and crisply. At this time, Masako spoke to me lightly beside me.

“Say you’ll stay! If you go back like this you might never see him again.”

“Ai?”

- Never see him again? Is she saying I might never see Naru again?

I turned back to look at her, Masako nodded.

“I… I really want to stay, but…”

I also hurriedly raised my hand. Bou-san raised his eyebrows.

“Since Mai is also staying, then I’ll handle her lodging costs.”

Wu… Thanks dad.

“Are you staying in such a place? There’re no restaurants, and there’re definitely very incredible bugs.”

“Then do you want to go back, Ayako?”

“Of course I’m staying!”

It was a unanimous decision, only Naru looked clearly unhappy.

4

Just like this, in the end all of us stayed behind.

The 3 men and 3 women each rented a small wooden hut. It was clearly the peak season, but there were very few campers. This place was so rural, it couldn't be helped that there were few people.

"Do we have to make our own dinner? Do you guys know how to cook?"

Standing in front of the kitchen, Ayako took a deep breath.

"If it's simple Udon noodles or something, then I know how to cook."

When I just finished, Masako immediately made a face of disgust.

"I… I don't really know…"

There was no use asking, just looking at her expression I could tell she definitely did not know how to cook.

The 6 tatami sized small wooden room had an attached kitchen. It wasn't that much different from my apartment in Tokyo; but, there appeared to be an enormous terrace where we could eat, there was a table made up of a round log and benches made from wood.

"I don't know if those men can cook or not."

"This is not clear then, I don't know how Naru and Lin are doing."

"Yeah, we have to get out to buy some stuff regardless; let that stupid bou-san go, I'll make him a list."

"Right."

Ayako really likes to look after people; it's no wonder she's the mother.

Like a child being nagged into working, I took the list Ayako had written and

ran to the little wood hut next door.

I knocked while I opened the kitchen door.

“Naru has decided to do it like this!”

- ?

Bou-san’s voice flew past my ears.

“That is –”

The windows of the kitchen and 6 tatami sized room were closed, but I could still make out the figures of people. A shadow moved, and the window immediately opened.

“So it is Mai!”

“Yeah, Ayako said to buy stuff.”

“Right, right. I’m coming.”

According to the results of my investigation, the only ones who say they can cook are Mum Ayako and Dad Bou-san.

At the same time, I bravely set forth to attempt to investigate Naru and Lin-san.

When I got to the small wooden hut nearby, this time I knocked properly. It was Naru who opened the door; when he saw my face he immediately showed his displeasure.

You don’t have to be so obvious in your dislike of me, do you?

“That is… Ayako wants to as you how you intend to handle your meals. Ayako says she’ll cook, so will you join us?”

“Do as you please, you don’t need to bother about us.”

- Right, right, I know.

I sighed. Really, how can this fellow – in the midst of my grumbling – “Then let’s have it like this, sorry for disturbing!”

After passing through the pine forest and trudging tiredly to the car park, I found Bou-san and John were waiting.

“Did Naru reply?”

Bou-san asked. I spiritlessly replied, “He said not to bother about him.”

“Yeah-“

Bou-san’s large palm gently patted me; unconsciously, I lowered my head.

“That is –”

“Yeah?”

“Masako said that we might never meet Naru again.”

Bou-san frowned.

“Is it like this?”

“If the office closes, I might really never meet him again.”

Bou-san did not answer.

“Hey, then don’t forget this.”

“What?”

“There are no banquets under the heavens that do not disperse.” (tl/n: all good things must come to an end.) I sighed softly.

“Yes.”

I don’t know where his home is; I don’t even know his telephone number.

If the company closes, we will never meet again. I think Naru will not take the initiative to contact me. Because, even up till now, he would never make a call regarding anything unrelated to work.

“Perhaps Naru and I are complete strangers.”

Hu-with a gentle pat on my head, I suddenly realized how important it was.

“Thinking closely about it, I don’t know Bou-san’s or John’s address either.”

We only meet in the office, and are together only during our investigations; what each of us does in rest of our time we completely do not know. Although we’ve visited Ayako’s home once, it was a single visit during an investigation, and she said we were not allowed a second visit.

“We won’t meet again anywhere outside work.”

I have never received a call at home; I don’t even know their telephone numbers.

If the office were to close, the probability that everyone would never meet again is very large.

Up till today, everyone has been looking after me; we’ve worked and encountered various experiences together. If I were to ask everyone if we are friends, I can’t say for certain that the answer will be yes.

It’s due to the office that I’ve met such a group of colleagues; we have no other forms of interaction. It must be because everyone feels that it is ideal like this; I too have never asked about the private lives of others, nor have I spoken about my own. Probably we were all like this. That’s why, thinking carefully about it, we are all shockingly ignorant about each other’s issues.

That’s why with desperately trying to get closer to each other at this time, I don’t think we can become friends. Everyone are adults older than me, they must have suitably adult lives and personal relationships; they couldn’t possibly be happy playing with a high school student. Mentioning high school student, although Masako is also a high school studnt she has a proper job.

“Mai!”

When John opened his mouth, Ayako’s voice cut in.

“You fellows! What time are you going to dillydally until?!”

Turning my head, Ayako was pulling a face at the entrance of the campsite car park.

“The small village shops will close earlier, hurry up and go!”

“Yes!”

“Also buy some stock cubes back!”

“Yes yes yes!”

“Answer me properly!”

Ah – she’s still really long winded.

“Yes sir!”

Mothers will still be mothers.

Naru and Lin-san had apparently decided to completely ignore us. Perhaps we don’t exist in their eyes.

When dinner was ready and I asked if they wanted to eat, they only coldly replied in the negative. Left without choices, we could only feed ourselves.

I didn’t know why Naru wanted to stay here, so I also didn’t know why we wanted to stay here. It’s like unreasonably stalking other people’s movements.

After having an early dinner, Bou-san etc went back to their small wooden hut on their own accord. While we were queuing to bath, I ran to the terrace. It was already dark outside, the breeze from the forest made one feel happy.

As I was spacing out, Masko’s face appeared.

“If you space out in this type of place, you’ll become food for the mosquitoes in the bush!”

“It’s alright, I’ve sprayed on insect repellent.”

“Did you spray enough?”

“It’s alright like this; mosquitoes like to go towards those of vigorous blood.”

“I’m sorry my blood is too vigorous!”

“Ah la, I didn’t say that that’s no good. It’s good to be liked by the mosquitoes in the bush.”

“I’ve never seen the benefit of that!”

Masako started laughing secretly.

“Hey, Masako.”

I looked at the bathrobe clad Masako.

“Why would I never meet him again?”

“A feeling.”

“Liar!”

I’m insisted. Masako suddenly spoke seriously.

“ – I can’t tell the real reason.”

“Is what you know related to Naru’s weakness?”

“I can’t say!”

“ – Stingy devil!”

Masako sighed softly.

“I think I probably know everything you want to know.”

I hurriedly looked at Masako.

“But, I still can’t tell you. Because I have an agreement with Lin-san and Naru.”

“Why do you alone know?”

“I only stumbled upon it.”

I tilted my head, thinking.

“Hey, when we just met you’d said it before.”

“Ai?”

“You said you met Naru before somewhere.”

“Did I say something like that?”

“You did; is it like this? You and Naru met before somewhere in the past.”

Masako thought for a moment.

“It shouldn’t have been that meaning.”

Ai, that’s as clear as mud.

“Naru has always been looking for this place –”

Masako’s voice reminded me of that doll like face; Naru’s voice flashed through my mind – “ – Finally – I’ve finally found it – ”

“The office, everything was for the sake of finding this place. That’s why, it’s possible to never meet him again.”

“Me?”

Masako replied with a single sentence.

“Not just you, me too.”

Chapter 2: August 8th

1

“He’ll refuse anyway.”

“You should ask anyway; it’s not like we deliberately not make their share.”

Ayako was preparing breakfast on the first morning on the mountain.

“In the end they’ll want you not to make their share anyway!”

“Why?”

“If I go I’ll not only be teased but be taken as an idiot. I’d rather take the trash out; I can be of a little use like that.”

“Your words hurt my pure heart!”

“What a fragile heart; you can’t survive like this in this modern society lacking in human feelings. Only thick skinned people survive; stop sulking and go!”

“Can’t you go, Ayako?”

Ayako’s head tilted slightly upwards and she turned back to look at me.

“Do you know how to cook?”

“Ugh… I don’t!”

“Since that’s the case then stop throwing a tantrum. I don’t know whether those two ate dinner last night or not, it wouldn’t be surprising if they didn’t.”

“I know it already!”

Stepping on the green grass making a rustling sound, I thought it was still better to check on those two problematic men. At this point, someone had

already arrived – it was Bou-san.

“I want to know what exactly is going on!”

That was Bou-san, standing in the vestibule.

“I don’t have time!”

“You bastard, you really are a narcissist no matter where you go. You have to let everyone understand you actions, don’t you.”

“It never crossed my mind to make anyone understand.”

“You…”

Naru, standing in the vestibule, suddenly turned his gaze towards me. Following that, Bou-san also turned and shot me a greeting. “Yo!”

This atmosphere was somewhat uncomfortable.

“That is… are you guys busy?”

“No!”

It was Naru who replied. I heard Bou-san sigh.

“Is there anything?”

Naru asked coldly.

“Ayako asks if you guys want to eat breakfast or not?”

“ – Can’t you just leave us alone?”

Yeah, I just knew he’d say that.

“Ah! – Got it! Sorry for the interruption!”

I hurriedly escaping that place with Bou-san following behind me.

“Do you have any business with them?”

“I wanted to ask, but Naru-chan did not appear to want to listen.”

– Why is Naru so headstrong? And so lacking in sympathy? And such a secretive person? And so ignorant of pleasing others?

(In the midst of my sulking…)

“Yeah…”

While I was mumbling to myself, I saw Lin-san walk over. Upon noticing Bou-san and I, he nodded slightly, before walking away without a word. For some reason I stopped in my tracks and looked at Lin-san.

Between the trunks of the pine trees I could see Naru standing at the small wooden hut and hear Lin-san’s voice.

“ – already set off within 2 to 3 days.”

– To come here?

“Contacting the professionals, they will send divers here as soon as possible. It should be afternoon by the time they arrive.”

– Divers?

I looked at Bou-san; Bou-san looked at me.

“What does ‘divers’ mean?”

“That should be people who dive into the water for work.”

“It can only be this!”

After Lin-san and Naru finished their conversation they shut the door.

“Why would he call divers here?”

“Because one needs a diving certificate to dive!”

“Diving needs a certificate?”

“Yeah yeah!”

– This… Does this mean that diving is a special skill that requires certification?

“It appears that Naru is looking for something over here.”

“That looks to be the case!”

“Does this mean that what he is looking for is in the water?”

“Yeah—”

For some reason, I felt a little unsettled.

“I’m going to stick my foot in!”

“Do you have a certificate?”

“I have, but I’ve never used it before!”

“But, Naru won’t allow us to take part.”

Thinking of Naru’s personality, Bou-san smiled bitterly.

“Indeed so!”

2

As expected, 5 divers arrived that afternoon, and started preparing to dive in the reservoir.

Because there wasn't much I could help with, I could only watch from the shore.

The campgrounds were by the mouth of the river, the reservoir was most inside. This river wasn't very deep nor very wide; pine forests lined both sides of the river, the small wooden huts in the forest and the tents in the campsite could be vaguely seen.

Following the flow of the river, the flow rate of the water gradually eased; in general one could swim across. However, the water was still very murky. One could see the soil at the bottom of the water from the shore. Furthermore, this place was high in the mountains, and the air was chilly. The water here should be very cold too. That's why I abandoned thoughts of swimming.

Far from the shore, there was a stationary boat. I looked blankly at it. The people in diving suits could no longer be seen. There were only two people remaining on the boat.

On both sides of the river there were jetties – there were quite a number of boats lined up there; but the professionals used their own motorboat.

Today, a rather strong wind blew across the surface of the lake; the clouds in the sky were also strange; the wind blew and caused the little boat on the surface of the lake to wobble unsteadily.

Because this was a campground, we weren't the only ones by the side of the lake. It was a rare sight to see so many people gathered by the lakeside, all looking at the small boat on the surface of the lake. Although some had left, the words that were spoken rode the wind into my ears.

“What’s going on there?”

“It’s not too clear.” These were probably a male and female university student.

“Come on, let’s swim.”

“Ne, I heard some unpleasant things!”

“What?”

“The lady from the convenience store said they were there to dredge for bodies!” The moment I heard that I turned to look at owner of the voice.

“Ah!”

“That’s a lie, right?!”

“I don’t know, I too only heard of it, somehow it makes one feel rather uncomfortable.”

“Faint! Isn’t that too disgusting?!”

“Then are we still swimming?”

– Body.

This is a person who died.

What Naru is looking for, the thing that Naru summoned the divers to look for, is it a body?

I suddenly felt tight in the chest; why was I uncomfortable? I didn’t know.

If I didn’t speak to anyone, I couldn’t tolerate this type of feeling anymore.

Hence I hurriedly returned to the little wooden hut; at this time I saw a black figure standing by the lake, looking at the little boat without any expression on his snow white face.

Slightly hesitant, I approached. Perhaps he heard my footsteps on the grass, Naru turned immediately. His dark gaze turned on me, but immediately returned coolly to the lake.

Although I was a little scared, and the thing I had to confirm was also rather frightening, I had to ask.

“Ne, it was you (Naru) who summoned those divers, wasn’t it?!”

When he heard this, Naru looked at me expressionlessly, wrinkled his brow slightly before replying me swiftly and simply.

“Yeah!”

“I heard you were looking for a body, is that so?”

Naru gently sighed, “has this already turned into a rumour?!”

“Is it true?”

“It’s true!”

“You’ve always been looking for this place, right?”

No reply.

“Does this mean the body has been found?” I had thought repeatedly about this, and hoped he would deny my words.

“…”

“Is it like this?”

“ – Yes.”

I momentarily widened my eyes.

“Then up till now, the incessant studying of maps, frequent travel and what not was all to look for a body?”

“Yeah!”

I hung my head. I had felt in the past that his travels were very strange, regardless of where he went he did not appear to go sightseeing. So this was the reason, his aim was not sightseeing at all.

“Can I know why you’re looking for a body?” Just as I thought he might not reply, I suddenly heard a cold voice.

“I can’t ignore it somehow.”

“That’s right – no!”

Why he would say it like this I don’t understand either.

“Is there any reason?”

How had the situation progressed? Why did he look for a body? Why was there a body here? Who was that body?

Masako had also said that running the office was also for this. Why did he specially open an office for the sake of finding a body? Could he not need the office any longer now that the body was found?

Naru wouldn't work on jobs that he had no interest in. And I completely could not feel that he was in debt. Could the operation of the office be for a different reason? But why would he need to open an office just to look for a body?

When Naru didn't speak, I was silent too.

"This has no relevance to you!"

I just knew he'd say this.

Gently sighing, I was just an unrelated person to be sure.

"That – does that person have any relation to Naru? Who is it?"

I asked, stuttering. This time, Naru's reply was a single sentence, with two syllabuses.

"(Elder) Brother!"

3

When they heard my words, everyone was shocked.

“Body?!”

I buried my head, and felt like crying for no reason.

Bou-san was also shocked. “Naru’s elder brother is in this lake?”

“Yeah…”

“He’s dead?”

Mumbling to myself, I didn’t catch what they were saying clearly.

“Ai? What?”

“No, nothing.”

Bou-san appeared a little displeased, and made a face at John and Yasuhara. Ai?! Why was everyone so secretive?!

“There really isn’t anything!”

“I said, you guys…”

I was already a little angry; why don’t they tell me anything?

With Naru too, it’d have been all fine if he’d said it out loud. Never in my dreams did I imagine that Naru was actually searching for his brother’s body; every time he returned from his travels I had asked a heap of stupid questions.

Just as I was about to speak my mind I suddenly heard Bou-san’s voice, “Lin!”

Turning back I saw Lin in the vicinity of the balcony handrail.

“Have you seen Naru?”

“I’ve seen him, he’s by the shore.”

“Thanks.”

Bou-san restrained Lin, who was about to go back with, “Is Naru’s brother sunk in here?”

Lin asked, slightly shocked, “Whom did you hear this from?”

“Naru told Mai.”

Lin glanced at me before turning his gaze back to Bou-san.

“Is that so.”

“ – It’s really regrettable that the situation is like this.”

Lin nodded. “As to why he died here, can we know?”

Lin lowered his voice and replied.

“ – I heard it was an accident.”

“Accident?”

Lin shook his head, “As for the details, Naru didn’t even tell me; all I know is that he was murdered.”

All at once everyone became completely silent.

At this moment when any speech would have been unbearable, someone opened his mouth to ask, “Murdered – then what about the perpertrator?” Bou-san asked quietly. Lin still shook his head; I couldn’t tell if he didn’t know or if he couldn’t say.

“Naru didn’t kill him, did he?” It was Ayako who spoke.

When Lin heard this he immediately glared at Ayako.

“Then why is the body in this lake?”

“I only know that Naru knows that it’s here.”

– ?

Could it be that Naru has some other complicated issues?

Just as I was considering that, I didn’t notice that the owner of the problem had appeared.

“So this is where you are.”

“Naru.”

“How are you?”

“I’m still good.”

“Really?”

We looked at Naru’s face, which was as white as it usually was, and thought whether we would be equally cold if we were in his shoes.

“It’s really very regrettable!” That was Bou-san’s voice; the reply was still annoyingly cold.

“Thanks.”

“Found it yet?”

“The visibility underwater is too low, it’s relatively difficult to drive the boat; there are also too many obstacles underwater.” Naru spoke as though making an investigation report; he replied without any emotion whatsoever.

“Perhaps it’s because it’s in the reservoir – it’d be good if it’s found soon.”

“I realized from the first that it’ll take a long time here, that’s why I wanted you all to go back first.”

“I’m really sorry for that.”

Naru shrugged his shoulders lightly, just as we prepared to turn back I saw 3 figures approaching.

They weren’t people we recognized – an old man, a middle-aged man, and a woman. I think I might have seen the woman before around the campgrounds.

The woman appeared to be saying something to the middle-aged man while looking at us; perhaps she was just giving them directions. The other two men, for some reason, wore complicated expressions.

“Could I ask if you are from Shibuya Psychic Research?”

I was slightly stunned; Naru looked suspiciously at the other party.

“That’s right.”

The elderly man used a handkerchief to wipe sweat off his forehead.

“Are you psychics?”

“More or less.”

Naru replied arrogantly; the younger man looked at Naru, a little troubled.

“I’m sorry, could I ask if you are -?”

“I’m the person in charge of Shibuya Psychic Research.”

The two men were immediately rooted to the ground.

“You’re actually so young…”

“I’m good; please explain your reason for coming.”

The two men exchanged glances, and the elder one spoke, “I’m really sorry to disturb you while you’re so busy, but please help us.”

– What in the world… did they come with a request?

Naru considered for a moment before nodding; in a rare sight, Lin interrupted, “Naru, right now we’re…”

Naru raised his hand to stop Lin from continuing. “It doesn’t matter.”

“But…”

“We’re waiting anyway, and not doing anything. – Please tell us the details of your request.”

4

It couldn’t be; wouldn’t it be troublesome to work at this time?

We showed the two clients into the little wooden hut. I, too, sat down, troubled.

The elder man straightened his back several times uncomfortably, before hesitantly producing his name card.

“I am called Matsunuma(松沼) and I am the village chief here. This is my helper, Tsukudata (佃田).”

“I am Shibuya, the head of Shibuya Psychic Research.”

“In reality, there has been some trouble in our village recently. Everyone discussed whether we should look for psychics, at this time I heard my niece mention your company, which coincidentally arrived at this place, furthermore you appear to be experts in this field…”

So that’s how it went, that’s why we would suddenly encounter a client here.

“Is this the thing troubling you all?”

“This… how should I put it…?”

The village chief appeared to have difficulty verbalizing; he looked towards his helper.

“There is actually a vacant primary school nearby; abnormal things always happen there…”

Naru sighed.

“I’m sorry, if you tell me only something like this, I don’t understand what exactly happened.”

“Ah…”

Saying that the village chief rubbed his forehead; this time his forehead was really dripping with sweat.

“This…” The village chief who had difficulty speaking shrugged off his assistant and rose.

“I hope you can keep this our secret.”

“We do not disclose the details of our clients’ requests to outsiders.”

“A lot of people have said they have seen spirits in this abandoned school. The details aren’t very clear, but everyone says they’ve seen human spirits and some sort of haunting by ghosts and demons. As it is a building of some age, we want to demolish it. But people say the ghosts there would definitely haunt something if we did so.”

What the heck, it isn’t any major issue. – It is a case of scaring oneself.

“When did the school cease operation?”

“Five years ago; to be accurate it was May five years ago.”

“So that’s why.”

“Wait a moment! Is this alright?” Bou-san cut in.

“It’s a strange time to cease operations in a school, it was May, right?”

Yes, the helper nodded.

“Actually, it is as you can see, the development of this area isn’t very good. There aren’t many children around; although there was a school, the total population of teachers and students did not exceed twenty. There were discussions of a merger, but suddenly they decided to close the school because after the completion of the reservoir the majority of the teachers and students moved away.”

“Is it this reservoir?”

“Yes.”

The helper’s questioning gaze rested on me.

“Actually, there was a major plan for building holiday villas near the school, but because there was that dirty thing nearby it was a little difficult to build a tourist

attraction. If there are rumors of paranormal activity there… that's why, please help us keep this a secret, and help us really get rid of this problem. You've also seen that there hasn't been any special development on this mountain, the golf course and the campsite are the only sources of income; this is a problem affecting our lifelihood."

Naru smiled coldly.

"So that's the case…"

Naru violently shut the file, "You said there are ghosts, are there any leads to follow?"

The helper shook his head, "None, if we knew we would be able to make some offerings."

"Were there any accidents happen in this school?"

"No."

"Then what about the people who said they've seen the spirits?"

"No… Although there is this rumor, as to who actually witnessed it I'm not sure…"

Naru smiled bitterly, the smiles were wiped off the faces of the people around me.

"It's all rumors; it'll do not to be so bothered by it."

"It's not wrong to put it like this, but just in case…"

"We will investigate it a little, but we cannot stay there. We cannot stay there because I have to handle the work here. If the investigation here at the reservoir is completed, we would probably cease investigations midway. Is this still alright?"

"It doesn't matter." Naru gently nodded.

"Then please collect the data and give it to us by the end of today."

5

“Will there really be something there?” Bou-san said, following the departing men with his eyes.

Yasuhara counted off his fingers, “If there is, it should be a spirit of a person who died in the school… shouldn’t it? With this we have a lead to follow.”

“Yeah…”

“Or perhaps a person who died outside the school who had a connection to the school…”

Yasuhara guessed, “But, why is it the school?”

“What why?” I asked.

“Why would the spirit of a person who died outside the school appear in the school? Earth-bound spirits appear at the site of the accident, but the school isn’t the site of the accident.”

“Could it be that it is looking for redemption?” Ayako said.

“After people die they will turn into spirits; under normal circumstances they do not remain in this realm. But if it had unfulfilled desires or if it did not even know that it has died, it becomes a spirit that is unable to pass into the next world and drifts around this world, a drifting spirit. Spirits with regrets would go to their desired location; spirits who are unaware of their deaths would temporarily return to their homes.”

“Yeah yeah.”

“But living people are unable to see spirits, right? And they can’t interfere with the situations in this world; even if they returned home they wouldn’t be seen by their family. That’s why they would move to some other place, like a familiar school, a memorable place or something. There are also spirits that stay at a

location and do not leave; if this is repeated many times it would turn into an earth-bound spirit.”

– Ai. Just as I was incredibly impressed, Bou-san interrupted,

“So there are people who think like this.”

“What’s the meaning of that?”

“That means there are still many different opinions in this world – isn’t that so, John?!”

Looking at John, his face was troubled. “Indeed it is so…”

“Where am I mistaken?”

“Not exactly mistaken. Because things concerning spirits cannot be clearly explained, that’s why I can’t say where exactly the mistake is.”

I didn’t understand either.

“Then what are the other theories?”

“You fellow, drifting spirits, earth-bound spirits or whatever shadow spirits, protective spirits, etc – all of these are unique to Japan, and are not used at all in Europe or America. Even if one talks about the spirit sightings, there are enormous differences between Japan and the west.”

“Ai…”

“In Japan we think that there are more mischievous spirits, and that ‘hauntings’ are caused by that.”

“Yeah, this is a spirit.”

“But in the west the defining borders are not like this; disregarding hauntings and the like, there are even fewer possessions etc.”

“Hei… is this so.”

Thinking carefully about it, there have really been very few stories of possessions, even after such a long relationship with them.

Bou-san looked at Naru, “What do you think, sensei?”

Naru shrugged, “Regarding research about spirits, it was originally the easiest

of the paranormal phenomenon to be confused with, because spirits are things that cannot possibly be brought into a laboratory."

"Wu… is that so?"

" 'Psychics', is what we call the gifted in the labs; because spirits have to be tested in the laboratory, naturally the easily tested spirits became the targets of the experiments. The spirits called by mediums are called summoned spirits, otherwise poltergeists are relatively easy to observe."

"Yeah… is that so."

"In other things related to spirits, people collect the testimonies of people who encounter spirits by chance. While the methods of collection are simple, but it is impossible to determine how many percent are true. Whether it is Japan or the west, there are inevitably uncountable reports of sightings, but not all of them can be believed.

"Oh!"

"For example, spirits in Japan haunt, while spirits in the west do not. Does this way of putting it mean that there are differences between Japanese and western spirits?"

"Since spirits are spirits then there is no difference in their nature. It's just like it doesn't matter if it's a Japanese cat or a western cat, cats eat mice, isn't that so?"

"And the same reasoning applies to spirits doing bad things. The western countries call haunting spirits 'evil spirits' and the remaining, non-haunting spirits are called 'ghosts'."

"So that's how it is."

"In the end, this is also just a theory. There are other vastly different ones existing. For example, if a spirit appeared here, and a witness was afraid it would do harm, and coincidentally caught a cold at this time, he'd say his cold was caused by his sighting the spirit. Hence the entire situation turns into a rumor of a haunting."

"That is indeed the case!"

“Yeah, with this it has turned into the theory that Japanese ghosts haunt while western ghosts do not. In actual fact it’s due to the psychology of the Japanese. – Just like that, once the situation is filtered by ‘people’, the truth of the situation will be unlimitedly twisted. There are numerous misunderstandings and hallucinations and mistaken confusion in the eye-witness testimonies; like this we are unable to tell what the truth actually was. Hence today’s research into spirits is such a mess.”

Ai…

“Because it is very difficult to do a systematic experiment, people have various different theories; some people believe that within a person’s body there is a ‘soul’, which remains even after death. And there are people who believe that the ‘spirit’ is a type of response between the living and the dead. And there are still others who believe that living things give off a type of unobservable ion, something just like a scent, the ion remains after the living thing dies, and becomes what people see as ghosts.”

“That description is rather fitting…”

“Actually, the terms ‘earth-bound spirits’, ‘drifting spirits’ or ‘protective spirits’ commonly used in Japan are not scientifically recognized terms. Neither do I know who started using these terms. Therefore as to what those terms actually mean, no one knows for sure, because there’s no way to confirm it.”

“Is this the way it is…”

“Neither their origins nor their meanings are clear, they are terms similar to slang. Without any suspicions, people picked them up and popularized them; this, too, is a difficulty in spirit research.”

“ – if it’s like this then doesn’t it equate to not knowing anything at all?”

I asked; Naru inclined his head and replied with a question,

“Do you want me to spell it out for you?”

“Yes!”

“Evidence that support the existence of ghosts – not one exists at all.”

– Ai?

“Then what have we all been doing?”

“What you’re doing are odd jobs.”

– That’s not so!

“What I do is collect statistics, record videos, sounds, and data from measuring equipment. For example, there is not a single tape which clearly records the appearance of a spirit, but there are many on which strange light and fog have appeared. I want to fully analyze what these actually are, but at the current level of scientific knowledge, it is completely impossible to explain what they are. I can only say they are new phenomenon witnessed in science. If I could collect them, then I might find their similarities, and from there make out the rules of their existence, and clear up how they actually exist.”

Ai…

“‘They’, whom I am looking for, are normally known as ghosts. Collecting and analyzing the data, and from there ‘hunt spirits’. This is what I am currently doing, in reality it is objectively collecting data, but this is only just a phase.”

“Then this is ghost hunt… then what about exorcisms?”

“The exorcisms are only secondary, in exchange for allowing me to conduct my investigations; the exorcisms are done to solve the other parties’ inconveniences, with this I could possibly get a clearer picture of the truth.”

“So that’s the case.”

But I did not completely understand, and asked, “But up till now we’ve encountered a lot of ghosts, everyone has seen them before. You’ve seen them yourself too; can’t these be considered evidence?”

“I’ve asked everyone once before: has everyone witnessed any experiences? Have I formally asked for evidence like this?”

“Ugh…”

“I have personally seen or felt spirits many times. That’s why I know and believe the things everyone sees. But I have no interest in the data collected by ‘man’; those things, regardless of the number collected, are incapable of being evidence to prove anything.”

Wu… my head started to ache, I sort of understood, but sort of did not understand; in any case Naru's and my stands are completely different hence this situation.

"It's cold…" Bou-san suddenly called out.

"As expected, it does get cold on a mountain."

"Do you want the windows closed? You could have caught a cold."

Ayako stuck her hand on Bou-san's forehead. "There's no fever."

"Really? I somehow feel a little warm…"

Bou-san looked at Naru and said,

"It's feverish, I'm about to start speaking nonsense."

"You think that I'm talking nonsense?"

" – As expected, you're incredible. That's my personal opinion."

In any case that was what he wanted to say. Bou-san, you're already an uncle-grade person and you're still so sly.

John also nodded. "I think that Naru is very incredible as well."

Naru smiled slightly.

"In that case – thanks for the compliments."

Chapter 3: August 13th 7am to 11am

1

The school was located about a 30 minute drive up the mountain.

Travelling from wide roads onto relatively narrow paths, I could vaguely see the school compound on the slope; at the end of the winding mountain road were the closed school gates.

Right in front of the school gates, which closed across the center of the road, were 2 or 3 residences, but I couldn't perceive any signs of human habitation. The glass panels in the windows were already spoilt; it was already uninhabited. Across the door of one of the residences was a sign declaring it a stationery shop; in front of the other house was an ice-cream refrigerator: they should have been a stationery shop and a makeshift snack shop.

As the school was located on higher ground, there was a slope from the row of houses to the school. The keys hung at the school gate at the foot of the slope; the gates opened inwards.

After driving up we arrived immediately at the field. Looking around, the field was covered with weeds. Besides the few residences in front, no other building could be seen; the scenery nothing but rolling mountains – it must have been tough for the students who studied at this school.

"It somehow feels like we're in the wilderness."

Someone said. Everyone started chattering their agreement.

"The school is too quiet, this somehow makes one feel uncomfortable."

I nodded to Ayako's words, especially since this place was a wasteland: it made

one feel desolate.

The school was a wooden 2-storey building constructed on a slope. Almost all the glass in the windows was already broken. The forest towering over it appeared like a giant accessory of the roof. As weeds had overgrown everywhere, the running track of the field could be only vaguely seen. The iron chains of the swings had broken; metal poles had fallen on the ground; water filled the sandpit; stench emitted from the small swimming pool.

“Looking at this, I don’t dare to imagine how children can feel lively in this type of school.”

“Yes.”

It felt somehow rather unpleasant; the school building which had turned into an abandoned shack gave one a strange, oppressive feeling.

“What are you thinking about?”

The one who asked me was Masako.

“I hate this feeling, it’s like it’s going to fall apart soon.”

“Yeah…”

“Do you see anything?”

Masako’s bright black eyes looked towards the school.

“The distance is a little far; do you feel anything, Mai?”

“I… I just got up, I’m still a little dizzy.”

“Ah… who was it who said she wouldn’t take a nap, and wanted to be a useful person?”

“Mind your own business! This I call personality! Personality!”

“These words are for your sake.”

“Shut up.”

“There’s a sparrow over there!”

I heard the pitter patter sound of a sparrow flying out. Only at this time, did our boss speak.

“Here!”

Staring at the boss’s face, executing a bow, and then standing motionless, the investigators respectfully awaited further instructions from the boss.

“Set up microphones outside to record sounds, we’ll do this for a day to monitor what happens, and based on our results we’ll position the cameras. How many are there that can still be used?”

“There’re still 3 left.”

In the course of the previous investigation there were many cameras which were severely damaged, furthermore the climate here was extremely warm and the cameras were kept for long periods of time in the car. Fortunately, Lin-san had done many checks; otherwise whether they could move would have been a problem.

“What about microphones?”

“They can be used at any time.”

“Position them from the outside. Try to set up the video cameras.”

“Got it.”

Good – Work! Work!

We had waited half a month for Naru to be discharged, and had spent our days lazing around; we were unhurried, without any tension at all. But the nerves that had relaxed had tensed up again; last night we had a meeting deep into the night, and this morning we came here bright and early.

Let’s do our bests! Let’s drum up some energy and get to work!

The boss strictly prohibited entering the school building. He was really in a cautious mood.

“Here, Bou-san!”

As usual, Bou-san was used to move the luggage and was ordered about here and there. Retrieving a video camera from Bou-san, I positioned it standing facing the window; as I couldn’t allow it to fall over, I had to bury its stand a little; it was Bou-san’s duty to dig the hole.

“Is this the place? Got it.” I adjusted the height, and pointed the microphone towards the inside of the building; where there was glass in the way, I shattered it.

“Yasuhara-kun, could I trouble you to pass me a microphone?”

He was even ordering around an injured person: just as expected of our insatiable boss.

“Ne! You fellow, the microphones are done.”

“There’s still one more; don’t get cut by the glass under there.”

“Got it!”

I was picking rocks. It was common for buildings to be on the high side. Reaching up carelessly would result in cutting one’s hand; in order to avoid cuts I had to use rocks to shatter the glass. Hey hey, it felt great when the glass shatters.

“The pitcher is here, hold it higher to throw!” (tl/n: the following conversation uses baseball terms) Yasuhara, Yasuhara please don’t play with the microphones.

“Ball!”

– Hn!

“How is this ball, Takigawa-san?”

“No no, you have to use more strength in your shoulder.”

“Yeah – the second pitch!”

“Ball! It’s in the outfield.”

“Let’s see the third pitch!”

“The pitcher is done for, he’s forced into a corner, there’re only 3 balls.”

“This pitcher is unexpectedly lacking in control.”

“Yeah yeah.”

“Look at me this time!”

Ok! Got it.

“Oh… a sure kill exploding shot!” With a thump the glass shattered.

“This is what they call pouring one’s hatred into an iron fist.”

“As expected of the most spirited Taniyama.”

“Because this is a broadcast from the location of tripping up in one’s job!”

“Who’s the tripper-upper – Taniyama-san!”

Really, this Manzai pair! (tl/n: the Chinese raw used the term ‘逗角儿’ with a note that it is similar to Chinese Xiangshen. It appears, from the context and from the note, that the original term used was ‘Manzai’, which is a Japanese comedic act between a straight man and a funny man.)

2

“Ok, job complete!”

Bou-san lifted his head and looked at the school building.

“Do you feel anything?”

“No. I feel quite nostalgic.”

– Nostalgic?

I tilted my head and looked at Bou-san; Bou-san smiled gently.

“This type of wooden school building somehow gives me a sense of déjà vu.”

“Ah…”

– Is this so.

“Me too.”

Yasuhara looked a little confused.

“When we first met we were investigating in a school building like this.”

“Ah… is that so.”

“Yeah, that was Mai’s first investigation.”

“Because Lin-san wasn’t there.”

“Yes, yes.”

Ya – it really is nostalgic.

I too lifted my head to look at the school building. Perhaps, this would be our final investigation.

“Is there anything?” Yasuhara asked.

“Although it gives me an uncomfortable feeling, I can’t feel anything at all.”

“What do you think, Bou-san?”

Bou-san pulled a face, saying, “Don’t ask me!”

“Because Bou-san can’t see spirits at all.”

“I’m so sorry about that.”

Yasuhara inclined his head in thought, “thinking about it, it’s really unimaginable. Under normal circumstances, isn’t it a matter of course that psychics are able to see spirits?”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Yasuhara looked around. “Matsuzaki-san appears to be a slightly special psychic, Brown is also an exorcist. I think exorcists don’t see spirits either… But it somehow feels strange that Takigawa-san can’t see them.”

“I could see them in the past.” Bou-san replied simply.

Ai – this is the first time I’ve heard this.

“Is it because you’ve become an adult that you can’t see them anymore?”

“You’re just trying to say that I’m getting old, aren’t you? – It’s because I broke my head in a previous exorcism, that some problems have appeared in my head.”

– And there was such an incident.

Yasuhara clapped his hands, “So that’s the story, this should be considered Takigawa-san’s secret then.”

I stopped in my tracks.

“What?” (tl/n: this is Mai) “Nothing much, I just felt that everyone here has a lot of secrets.” (tl/n: Yasuhara) “That’s Lin and Naru.”

“Not only them.”

Eh???

“Doesn’t Matsuzaki-san have some special powers? Hara-san appears to be a medium, but in reality could she be a psychic researching psychology?”

“Yeah.”

“Taniyama doesn’t have any siblings. While Bou-san could see, he is no longer able to now. Look here, aren’t these everyone’s secrets?”

“Is that so.”

“It’s not like we deliberately withheld the information.”

Bou-san laughed bitterly.

“There’s only Brown left.”

“Yeah yeah.”

Ah... mentioning John, we have to ask Bou-san.

“Do you know anything, Bou-san?”

“I haven’t confirmed this with him.”

“What? Tell us.”

“John isn’t an exorcist.” Bou-san said.

“What? What in the world?”

“If it’s getting rid of demons, not everyone can do it; there’re a lot of troublesome rules especially for Catholics. Although I’m not too clear myself, I think exorcism can only be conducted by priests of bishop(?) rank and above.” (tl/n: somebody check the rank here please.) “So John is a bishop then?”

“There aren’t any bishops who are that young. Bishops are really great people.”

“Ai…”

“Furthermore, to do exorcisms, one must inform one’s superiors; one must receive permission to exorcise like this. Furthermore he has to fast for a certain time.”

“This really is rather troublesome…”

“Isn’t that so!”

“Yeah.”

“Because the church is really doing this, and John really is a priest, but despite this, to exorcise so haphazardly he’d encounter the big problem of expulsion, so I

feel there's some hidden story here."

Ai… "When did this happen?"

"This? I knew it from the start. Naru-chan knows about it too; in the beginning he rather suspiciously commented of John: he's really young."

So that's the case. All of us really have many secrets.

"That leaves you, young man."

"I'm not a psychic, I'm simply one of the Young Investigators Club." (tl/n: the following conversation has references to CLAMP school detectives and Man of Many Faces) – Puchi (tl/n: sound of escaping laughter) "You really do look like one – ha ha, Young Investigators Club."

"Isn't that so? I have to make a BD badge then."

"What's that?"

"One of the seven tools of the Young Investigators Club."

"But aren't you just one person?"

"Do you want to join, Taniyama-san?"

Bou-san laughed,

"Really, is Kobayashi-kun going back?"

"Yes, Akechi-san."

"Shouldn't Akechi should be Naru then?"

"Really? For Shibuya-san…"

"The man of twenty-faces?"

"Yes yes!"

In the end, wherever we go we still laugh like idiots.

3

The school building was an elongated block running north to south; on the west side was a long row of classrooms, on the east side was the field; there was a long narrow flower bed surrounded by a fence on the west. The slightly jutting out place on the north was a door; at the south the school hall joined the building in an ‘L’ shape.

There were a total of 6 microphones pointing towards the windows of the first floor recording sound. We positioned video cameras immediately upon entering from the vestibule and inside the main hall. We also placed one in front of the vestibule, and in the corridor connecting the hall to the vestibule.

“So that’s why – when the investigation was at my school the car was parked at the back was for this.” I looked at the equipment and mumbled to myself.

A concrete path joined the hall and the school building, with eaves sheltering it (but there were holes everywhere). Passing through the corridor to the entrance of the hall, there were 3 concrete steps. The door to the hall above these was open, the other side of the door was an empty hall; here, we also placed a video camera facing inwards. On both sides we placed cameras and monitoring devices – this was another point.

The wires of the microphones and the video cameras were stretched a long distance. Although the cables we used for our investigations were very long, there was still a limit. The recording devices had to be closer to the microphones; hence they were placed at two locations this time.

Usually we would set up our base where we placed the equipment, but when there is no base we would temporarily set up such a spot.

In the same breathe, because the power was not on, our power source was connected from the power line by a tradesman. There are many inconveniences

investigating in this type of abandoned building.

“Mai, the tape.”

Hearing Naru call me, I hurriedly carried the tape and ran over. Recently we’ve been using cassette tapes and recorders to record sound.

“Have you understood anything yet?”

“I still don’t know right now, the first day we only temporarily monitor the situation, without much expectations either.”

“Wu…”

Yasuhara glanced briefly around, “Is there really something here? I only feel it has a little of that type of atmosphere.”

“I don’t know, - it should clear up once we investigate it a little; in any case we’ve got quite a bit of free time now.”

To pass the time? From our position isn’t this forced labor?

Oh well, I sighed and thought, Naru feels bored because he’s waiting for his brother’s body to be dredged out.

But why is he so insipid, as though nothing had happened. As expected, the structure of Naru’s mind is different from ours’.

Naru spoke into the communicating microphone, “Lin, we’ve completed preparations on my side, how’s your side going?”

“Ok, preparing to start recording.”

“Got it.” When he finished Naru looked towards us, “If there’s anything it’d be recorded, – under normal circumstances, that is.”

With that, his black pupils turned towards the other direction.

“We can’t say there are no places of concern either.”

– Eh???

I felt slightly confused; Yasuhara nodded as well.

“Regardless of what we think, it doesn’t feel like the village chief’s direct, respectful request is for nothing.”

“I concur.”

I tilted my head in thought, “What do you mean?”

“Subsequently I asked the lady who introduced the village chief and co to us. Didn’t they say they haven’t heard rumors of ghosts?”

“Yeah, the other workers also said the same thing.”

But… Yasuhara’s expression also showed slight incomprehension.

“But, if there really were no rumors, why would they deliberately come to make a request? Yesterday, the village chief’s assistant appeared to be continually unsettled.”

Listening to Yasuhara’s analysis, Naru nodded.

“Do you like emulating detectives a lot, Yasuhara?”

“Yes, did you hear that just now?”

Naru smiled slightly and nodded. At this time,

“Ne, do you want a rest?” Ayako said.

Glancing at my watch, it was already past 10. The wind had also risen, there could be a typhoon; it was a humid, uncomfortable wind.

“I’m going to check the video cameras again.”

If they were toppled by the wind, we wouldn’t be able to collect any data at all.

“Ah, I’m going too.”

“Hurry!”

Yeah yeah, aren’t you going then?

Yasuhara jogged into the courtyard and checked the stones holding the camera stands. We picked more stones to hold down the unstable places.

“Yeah! It shouldn’t fall over like this.”

Just as he was mumbling to himself,

(--- En ---) (tl/n: groan)

We heard some sound – vaguely present; it came from a place near yet far

away.

“ -?”

Yasuhara looked around us; there was not a person in sight.

“What’s up?”

“Did you hear something just now?”

“No…?”

Ah ne? Was I hallucinating? – Or was it the sound of the wind rustling the branches?

(--- Ah ---)

It came again.

“Ne, Yasuhara, did you hear something now?”

Yasuhara wore a face filled with regret.

“It sounds like a person’s voice…”

“What is it…?”

Yasuhara gently swept away the dirt and stood up.

“Let’s go… it somehow feels strange.”

“Yeah… let’s go.”

We returned hurriedly. Behind us, the branches creaked and groaned.

4

We all sat on the concrete steps on the vestibule. Although there was a small sheltered table in the vicinity of the entrance, it was very small as it was in the shade. The wind that blew was warm, and not refreshing in the least.

“Mai, do you want juice or oolong tea?”

“Oolong tea.”

Although I was very thirsty, there wasn’t any water at all in the pipes. To drink the murky swimming pool water would amount to a suicidal act.

“Perhaps it’s because of water that it’s so difficult.”

Thinking back a little, this is still the first time we conducted an investigation under our own direction. Although we had brought quite a few bottles of drinks with us prior to coming, it was completely insufficient for so many people.

“Yeah, we did go and buy some during the day, and we still had to come back by this time. – Pass (the bottle).”

Masako, who holding back laughter, passed over a pretty blue plastic teacup printed with flowers – much like a cup a child uses for tooth brushing.

“I want some also!”

Bou-san cut in.

“Please go ahead, Takigawa-san.”

“– Whatever, is this the one?”

Bou-san received the cup from Masako’s hands and glanced inside, and immediately appeared extremely disappointed.

“Paper cups are discarded once used, it’s too wasteful. This is Takigawa-san’s cup.”

“This is Naru’s, and this is Lin’s.”

I proudly handed the cups to everyone; everyone’s cups were all different.

“Here, Yasuhara, John.”

When everyone got their cups they were all stunned, their eyes surveying the cups in each other’s hands.

The laughter Masako held back burst forth; Ayako and I were already laughing unstoppably.

“– You fellow, you’re clearly doing this to waste time.”

Bou-san, who spoke restlessly, held the cup in his hands. It was printed with dinosaurs.

“Hey hey hey hey…”

Because the location we had decided to investigate was an abandoned school, the chance that the pipes couldn’t be used was very high. Ayako had said, what would we drink then? That’s why cups are necessary, this was from Masako; it’s too uneconomical to buy paper cups, so let’s buy cheap cups, was what I said.

Hence, when Bou-san went to buy dinner and we passed by the stand selling plastic cups, the three of us couldn’t help exchanging glances.

“How cute, what about this?”

The one with swans printed on it was John’s.

Naru, who was looking displeased, had a cup with foxes printed on it. Lin-san’s had puppies. How about that? Isn’t it fitting?

“You lot never lose that playful spirit, really.” The one with crabs printed on it belonged to Yasuhara, who evaluated. With that he lifted his head and looked towards the sky, “Ah ne, the clouds have come out.”

The thick, grey rain clouds could be seen on the nearby mountains.

“It could be about to rain. Didn’t the weather forecast predict rain?”

When he heard John’s words, Bou-san stood up.

“It’ll be troublesome if it rains; I’ll go buy lunch since it’s still early.”

“Yeah.”

Masako also stood up, followed by Yasuhara.

“I’ll take advantage of this time and go find out any news.”

3 people should be enough to handle buying lunch, so I stayed back to keep watch.

“Then I’m counting on you!”

After Bou-san’s car disappeared, John looked at the sky, slightly worried. “It really is about to rain.”

Naru and Lin also stood up.

“ -? Is the rest over yet?”

“I’m going to the observation spot; if it rains we’ll retrieve the equipment at once.”

Right. It’d be a major issue if the equipment were to be ruined by rainwater.

Ah… ah… it was with much difficulty that I could rest a little.

The sunlight dimmed, it started feeling a little chilly. Just as I took a deep breath, thick clouds covered the sky overhead; a strong wind started blowing, the air was mixed with damp; the other side of the mountain darkened.

“This won’t do, it’s raining.”

John stood up and I hurriedly rose too. When we ran outwards, large droplets started falling pitter patter.

“Hn, we haven’t gotten there yet.”

We ran through the pattering rain, when we arrived Naru had already started keeping the adapters.

“Go to the back gardens to keep the microphones.”

“Got it.”

When John and I walked towards the back gardens, the rain started pouring down. When we got to the back gardens, it had already started coming down for real.

“Ya…”

“There’s no way we can keep it like this.”

John said that as he disconnected the microphone beside him.

“We’ll have to wait for the rain to cease before setting up again.”

“That looks like the only option.”

While we joked and retrieved the equipment, the rain got heavier and heavier. When we carried the microphones back, it was truly raining cats and dogs.

5

After running back to the observation point and replacing the microphones, we went back to the vestibule with Naru. Not only were there many holes in the shelter above the corridor, the wind also blew quite a lot of rain in; we couldn't get out of the rain at all.

By the time we got to the sheltered vestibule, we were already drenched, and that place didn't provide any shelter at all. Everyone gathered at where the door opened into the vestibule, and I jumped in too.

"It's a really heavy rain."

The wind blew the door shut. Because a bit of glass still clung stubbornly to the windows, the wind stopped. The sound of the rain was also slightly muted, and I could finally let out a relieved breath.

"I feel like I've just gone for a swim."

"I wish I was wearing my swimsuit at this time."

"Could it be that we can't investigate today?"

Saying that, John looked at Naru, whose hair was also dripping with rain water.

"– Looks like this is the case."

"I have deeply understood how easy and relaxed our previous investigations have been."

"Yes."

Although it was very uncomfortable to be drenched, we didn't have towels or anything else, so we had to tolerate it.

"Ne, thinking about it, does it matter that we're inside the school now?"

"Idiot! If there's anything unexpected we'll just jump out immediately and all

will be well.” Was what Ayako said.

Indeed, the distance to the aged wooden door frame was about 1.5m; only 2 steps were needed for us to jump out.

“Yeah.”

No way. Because Naru was too cautious, even I had turned a little cowardly.

“There wasn’t anything at all before noon.”

If there was a strong spirit, there would be a rebound when psychics came, but from the start there was nothing at all.

“It was like this to begin with,” Naru said coolly.

“Hey… could there be some moderately honest spirits?”

“There are spirits that completely do not respond up until exorcism.”

Eh… is this so.

I looked out through the dirty windows. The upper halves of the doors that opened onto both sides were embedded with glass. Because that large piece of glass had shattered, I could see that it was raining cats and dogs outside.

To be in this type of building during this type of weather somehow gives one an indescribable feeling. Especially when one isn’t alone and together with others, it feels somewhat strange.

“What should we do, Naru? Should we abort it today?”

“What to do…”

It didn’t look like a shower.

“Even if we were to go back, we’d get drenched again when we run to the car.”

Ayako’s body was relatively untouched by the rain.

“Ayako didn’t get caught in the rain. Unfair!”

“As if.”

“Regardless of what happens, we have to wait for Bou-san etc to return.”

“That’s true.”

Naru suddenly took a step.

“What’s up?”

“Bring the file over.”

Can’t you forget work while we’re getting out of the rain? Really.

“It’d get wet.”

“It’s already wet.”

Indeed.

Naru reached out to grab the door.

“-?”

“What’s up?”

Naru pushed the door with all his strength. But it was stuck somewhere. The door merely creaked and groaned but didn’t move. Ayako almost burst out laughing.

“Naru you’re weak.”

“It’s the door’s problem. It’s too old!”

I said that as I reached out. Although I used all my strength…

“-? Why doesn’t it move?”

Naru shook the door with some violence and used his shoulder to ram the door. Following that his expression turned serious.

“Could it be locked…?”

I mumbled to myself… On the other hand I was aware there couldn’t have been that possibility.

Lin and John also ran over, and the three of them pushed the door together. They reached a conclusion immediately.

“– The door can’t be opened.”

Chapter 4: August 13th 11am to 3pm

1

“What? Are you kidding?”

Not daring to put it into words, silence reverberated between us.

“Could it be that because of the rain, the wooden door has taken up water and gotten stuck? If the door cannot open, let’s try the windows.” This was Ayako’s voice.

Thinking about it, there were many windows in this place, and the glass was already broken; there was no possibility of being trapped in this place.

“Mai, John, retreat.” Ayako picked up the empty glass bottle by her feet.

“Let’s break this glass and open it from the outside.”

“We’ll discuss who gets out of here first later.”

“As long as it isn’t me.”

Although our tones were relaxed, our facial expressions had stiffened a little. Ayako banged the empty bottle against the glass, creating a sound that put shivers down my spine; shards of glass littered the ground.

The bottle that was used to hit the glass, and the glass that was hit – the only one that shattered was the bottle.

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

I gestured to Ayako, who was slightly unsettled. “Aren’t there many other windows? Do we try them?”

“Y…yes.”

Naru stopped us, who were about to make a move. “Don’t move unnecessarily.”

“Ah?”

“I’m going to investigate it first. John, go to the second floor to check. – Mai!”

“Here!”

“Go with John, do not ever get separated from him. Matsuzaki-san, can you go with them too?”

“Go. Mai, go, explore forth.”

“Yeah!”

I hurried behind John and Ayako. My drenched clothes stuck heavily around my body.

Stairs were right in the center of the corridor straight from the entrance hall. If we climbed up the stairs, straight ahead would be the stage, further up were walls made from plywood, completely blocking any possible exit.

“Ah ne, there’s nowhere to go from here.”

“What a short exploration.”

“There’s a door.” There was a small door where Ayako pointed, it was locked with a small metal lock.

Although it was locked with a padlock, the lock came off the wood with a slight tug. The wood had already rotted away. Pulling aside the wood was a small doorway, we couldn’t pass through unless we bent over. Inside was a flight of stairs.

“… What should we do?” I looked towards John. Should we go down from here? What should we do if the door won’t open after we enter?

“Mai and Matsuzaki-san, stay here and keep the door open. I’ll go ahead to take a look.”

“But Naru said not to get separated.”

John smiled and said, “I’m just going a little further up, I’ll come back right after checking the state of the windows. If it’s open there I can still get out; if the windows there cannot be opened, then the rest of the windows cannot be opened either.”

I could see a window not far from the top of the flight of stairs.

“You’re just going up to that place, right?”

“Yeah, just there. I’ll test if that window can be opened and come right back.”

“Yeah…”

I propped the door open with my back, Ayako also held the doorframe tightly. John bent over and went inside. It was far dustier inside than outside.

Besides the window, there was no other light source. The light from the window was also very dim due to the rain. Inside the school building, it felt like it was already dusk.

At the top of the stairs, a corridor stretched out. Because it was a two storey building, on the first floor on the right, there were seven classrooms lined up in a row.

“Why are there so many classrooms?”

“Probably because there were so many students when this school was first built.”

“Is that so… as the number of students decreased, the second floor was not used and sealed off.”

“Probably.”

As I spoke, my eyes followed John’s back closely. John stood in front of the window and shook the window slightly, before coming down immediately. It felt like the window couldn’t be opened, it didn’t budge an inch.

“Doesn’t it work?”

John smiled bitterly, “No. I somehow feel like the windows here are all crooked.”

Saying that, he emerged from the doorway. Only at this point did I realize how

tense I was; only after John emerged fully, did I finally relax. Ayako, too, let out a breath.

After we came down, Naru and co were still testing leaving through the windows. After hearing John's explanation, Naru's expression turned extremely severe.

"How's it going down there?"

"It can't be opened."

"Let's use a more forceful method."

"Let's do so."

Lin opened a near-by classroom and took out a chair. John thoughtfully took out a small bottle from his pocket, and gently scattered drops of water and drew them into a cross.

"Please stay further away." Lin picked up the chair and smashed it; I hurriedly covered my ears. An ear-piercing sound was created momentarily.

"– Ah."

I looked at the shattered chair, then at the window. At the instance the chair was flung towards the window it swayed crookedly. But that was all: neither the window frame nor the glass sustained any damage at all. I picked up a broken chair leg and flung it towards the glass. Regardless of how hard we smashed the glass, not a single crack appeared.

Without any inflexion whatsoever, Naru said, "We have been completely sealed in."

2

“What should we do?” I asked. Naru shrugged.

Everyone temporarily returned to the entrance hall and sat down.

“We still don’t know the opponent’s goals –”

“Opponent?”

“Do I have to explain to you? – It’s the opponent who makes use of paranormal strength to seal us inside this place.”

“If that’s the case, then the opponent shouldn’t be human, right?”

“Based on common sense, we are currently in this type of situation.”

“– At least we’ve found out there really is something over here.”

“Yes, I didn’t expect there to be anything.”

“Indeed.”

But the unchanging fact was, the sound of the rain continued on outside, it felt as though there was a waterfall outside.

“Forget it; then aren’t we going to do anything?”

After sighing, Ayako said, “Bou-san and co who went shopping will come back soon. They might find a way to get in from the outside.”

“But if they can’t?” When I said that, Ayako’s face was filled with dislike.

“We’ll make them do a little something regardless; fortunately they can still send a little food and water in through the places where there is no glass. I think, like this, we can survive for a while in any situation.”

Naru laughed bitterly, “The problem is how much we can hope.”

“Yes.”

“Although we don’t know what our opponent is planning to do, I don’t think it simply just wants us to feel troubled or happy.”

Ayako was silent, John spoke, “Yes, it can’t be helped that we wait here, there’s nothing else we can do.”

– Yeah, it was indeed like this.

Naru nodded and looked at us. “Does anyone here have a lighter?”

“I brought one.” Ayako nodded. Naru took it from her, then glanced once more around the entrance hall.

“First use the shoe rack to set up a barricade in the corridor.”

“Are barricades any use against spirits? Isn’t it better to use the classroom?”

In response to my query, Naru shrugged his shoulders. “The classroom won’t do, we cannot get just a temporary reprieve, we must think of what might happen after the sun goes down.”

???

I felt confused, Naru immediately put on an arrogant look. “Do you want to wait around in complete darkness?”

Ah, I got it. And that was really very embarrassing, for me not to understand. With the lighter we could light a bonfire on the ground.

There were 2 footstools in the vestibule, and 2 shoe racks as well. The pieces were lined up 4 abreast – probably because there used to be many students originally. There were many more unused shoe racks piled up in the vestibule – a brief count showed there were more than 10 of them. We moved most of these onto the corridor.

“Because if anything happens, we can’t get to the other side either, so please don’t completely block it.” Lin said.

“If we don’t block it, then isn’t it pointless?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

We stacked the shoe racks on either side of the corridor up to the ceiling, with a gap in between for people to pass through. Slightly in front of that gap, we

stacked up some more shoe racks. It was just like hiding the entrance with a screen.

“Is this alright?”

“It’s about there. Who brought the strap?”

“I have some – but they are plastic.”

I handed the strap to Lin; from the inner pocket of his jack, Lin took out a protective seal and stuck it side of the ‘screen’ made from shoe racks facing the corridor.

“That… may I ask a question?”

Lin didn’t reply but just looked at me.

“Why do you do this, does this not matter?”

“There is a popular believe that evil spirits can only walk straight, that’s why there’s the custom of placing a wall in front, or on the inner side of a door. It’s approximately similar to this false wall or screen.”

“Ai… is that so.”

“Although it’s only a saying that they can only walk straight, the false wall really has an effect – because the spirits perceive this as a real wall.”

“There are spirits that can pass through walls too, aren’t there?”

“There are. If we’re talking about spirits that can pass through walls, they can naturally pass through this setup easily. But if that’s the case, then blocking it totally would give the same result.”

Ah – so that’s the case.

“There’s also a door on the second floor.”

“Yeah, although it is very small.”

“Should we erect a false wall there to seal it up in advance?”

3

We broke the already worn and broken foot stools and lit them.

Although it had not darkened inside the school building, it is indeed true that the presence of fire is calming. Furthermore, our wet clothes were icy cold against our skin – that's why we felt even more that it was a great thing to have fire.

Although there was an entrance facing the outside, it didn't move an inch despite how much we tried. On the inside there were 2 entrances, both of which were sealed with protective seals. We gathered around the fire and sat on the cement floor. Although it was covered in mud, there was nothing we could do about it.

"Mai, do you want a drink?" Ayako called me.

"Something sweet."

"Your cup?"

"The one with the frog. – Ne, pass it over, Naru."

Naru looked like he was thinking about something.

"There are seven classrooms on level 1, but there were only twenty students. How were those seven classrooms used?"

"The two at the very end had the separating wall knocked down – it was originally a staffroom, but was later turned into a classroom. The next room was originally the sickbay, which doubled up as a staffroom."

"Did the teacher stay there?"

"No, the teacher's lodgings are directly facing the front entrance – apparently there were houses inside there in the past. The fourth room from the inside was

originally the home sciences room – some birds and animals were kept there. The remaining 3 rooms were originally a science lab, an art room, and a music room, which were by no means used at that time. It was originally a comparatively large building – one was renovated into a swimming pool."

So that was how it was. Mentioning that, all these were mentioned during our meeting.

"What about the size of the school."

When Ayako asked that, Naru's face flushed with displeasure. "Did you completely not hear what was said during the meeting?"

"Ohhhhh."

"There were 8 villages in this area, but 3 of them had disappeared long ago."

"The disappearance of farming villages is really serious."

"But – two of those villages are at the bottom of the reservoir."

"Is that so…"

Mentioning the reservoir, I recalled it. We don't know how the work that was progressing at the reservoir was going. Although it was interrupted by this storm, they probably haven't found it yet. – Because if they had found it, there should be someone coming here to inform us.

Looking out through the window, the rain outside had eased a little. I could see the car just outside – that was so provocative.

"The question is what the other party aims to achieve by closing us up in here. Regardless of what happens it looks like they don't plan to let us leave so easily."

"That's what it looks like."

Looking at the watch on my wrist, we've been sealed away for nearly two hours already. As it was raining outside, the sky should darken earlier than usual. I looked at the bonfire – if the sun goes down we'd be dependent on it for illumination.

– No! If Bou-san and co comes back, they should be a great help.

"Bou-san etc are very slow."

Ayako nodded in agreement to my words. “Yes, - could it be because Yasuhara wanted to ask around for information?”

“Yeah…”

“They could be away until evening.”

“That shouldn’t be so. They did go out to buy lunch.”

“I didn’t hear that. – Anyway this is all we can do. It’s not like we have any other countermeasure.”

Naru shrugged uninterestedly to Ayako’s words.

“We’ve been closed in with much difficulty, so let’s see how we should go about the investigation of this building. There’s no use in being impatient to get out.”

– He actually said this so coolly in such a frightening situation.

“The people at the campsite said they never actually heard rumors about the appearance of spirits here.”

Ayako sighed.

“Forget it – even if there are rumors, there are also things that people do not mention.”

“But, didn’t the helper mention the lead that there weren’t any spirits?”

“Yes.”

“We might have been tricked, we can’t tell.”

It was Naru who spoke.

“??”

Naru started smiling forcedly again.

“Didn’t the helper mention it? That they hoped that we’d help them keep it secret? Income from tourism is a matter of life and death to them.”

“It was indeed mentioned.”

“It’s not only the presence of rumors. In reality, it probably might not be as simple as whether there are rumors or not.”

“Not only? Do you mean that in actual fact there are spirits that appear, and that they haunt as well?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. The probability that something major had happened is very high, that’s why the village chief came to make the request in person.”

“Yeah…”

“But tell us truthfully then. This ‘problem’ will leak out and make them feel troubled; the problem affects the volume of tourists and hence their livelihoods. – Hence the details of the situation are hidden.”

It really is dangerous enough – “Fortunately, the (people who run the) campsites are all their relatives. Hence, as relatives, they will not leak the secret.”

– Even if this was not so, the staff at the campsites depend on income from tourists for their meals; based on this point they would not speak.

“—Yeah.”

That’s why I say this is a situation created by adults.

“What do you think that major incident was?”

“We still don’t know,” saying that, Naru stood up. “I’m going inside to investigate.”

4

Due to Naru's resolute idea, everyone dived into the exploration of the school compound.

"Before we begin, it's better to be a bit more cautious; no one should leave by him/herself."

– Yeah.

Everyone slowly walked out through the false wall, and then firstly we went to the first floor's classroom, which was filled with stuff. Tables and chairs were piled in a corner of the disused room, just like a gym storeroom stacked with vaulting boxes. The atmosphere was slightly different in the fourth classroom. The fourth classroom was arranged neatly. Here, the bird cages, enclosures, and water troughs had already ceased operation. Although it was neatly arranged, the thick layer of dust gave one a desolate feeling.

"It really makes one feel uncomfortable." Ayako glanced at the parched water trough and pulled a face; a black, mud-like substance stuck to its inside, a mild stench of rotting permeated the classroom.

"Shibuya-san," John called. He was squatting by a small mountain of dust.

"This…"

In the corner of the classroom…

In the corner of the classroom was a mountain of rubbish the size of a chest of oranges. Looking closely, there really was a chest-like something there, it had rotted away so it looked like it was going to fall apart soon. Apparently there was something placed in it; it was covered with a thick pile of rubbish. Furthermore, a chain peeked out from amongst the rubbish.

The rusted chain extended from the chest to the wall of the classroom,

engaging a large nail on the wall.

“—What is this?”

When Naru pulled it, a faded, red something was dragged out of the pile of rubbish immediately.

“– This shouldn’t be a ring, should it…?”

“It’s probably a collar for dogs or something.”

I let out a breath.

“Lin, is there any –”

Before Naru finished, Lin had already handed over a ballpoint pen. Naru took it and started searching through the rubbish.

“What are you looking for?”

As I spoke, I realized that the collar looked like it had not been unfastened at all; it was just the size that would fit the neck of a cat or a dog. – But, why wasn’t it unfastened?

This was an abandoned school, so if animals were kept here they should have been brought by somebody. Otherwise, who would bring animals here and leave them alone? Even if someone brought animals here, they couldn’t have left the collar. And the one left behind was still unfastened. Somehow it felt like there was something up here.

Naru picked up a grey fragment from the pile of rubbish.

“—this is –”

“It’s probably something’s bone.”

It shouldn’t be –

Naru placed the bone into the chest, and clapped his hands to get rid of the dust.

“It looks like the village chief and co are really a bunch of sly foxes.”

“Yes.”

John nodded his head in agreement.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What with the school ceasing operations – I think the reason shouldn’t be due to the reduction in student numbers. If the school wound up operations following proper procedures, they wouldn’t have left animals on their own like this. Furthermore –”

The collar we found in the chest – it was like the animal died on the litter with the collar around its neck.

“That chest is a paper chest, it’s a very light item. If an animal found out about this, it would move it. But it quietly stayed in the corner of the classroom; it didn’t even look like it had been toppled before. The cloth sewn at its base is also in good condition. I think this dog died in a condition without hunger or noise.”

“Why?”

“—I don’t know.”

The unpleasant tone of voice and the sound of the rain outside blended into one.

Neatly arranged on the table were 3 water troughs, 4 bird cages, and a cage that was just suited to keeping rabbits or some similar animals. A thick layer of dust covered every item. Beneath that pile of rubbish, small grey bones were buried.

I suddenly felt chilly, but the reason I felt chilly could no longer be due to my wearing wet clothes.

5

Although the next room was said to be a spare staffroom, it was practically a storeroom.

The room following that was another classroom.

The one that was most recently used as a classroom was the original staffroom. Inside, there were 18 little tables, all lined up at the front.

“So there were 18 students.”

“According to the information from the Village Chief, because 14 of the 18 students moved away all at once due to the construction of the reservoir, it resulted in the termination of the school operations.”

“Was that really the case?”

I looked round at the tables in the classroom, then quickly checked the insides of the tables.

“—Ne, there’re things still left inside the tables.”

John and Ayako also came over to look inside the tables.

“Hn, here too.”

“There is on my side too.”

Drumming up some courage, I pulled out the things inside the table. There were ancient textbooks that had gone slightly moldy, their pages practically glued together.

Looking around again, practically all 18 tables had something or other left inside.

“The school clearly stopped running, why are these things still left?”

It had already progressed to this stage before Ayako realized it.

I knew it too. –Almost none of the words the Village Chief or his helper said could be believed.

“They really are all left behind, it’s just as though the people here all suddenly died.”

On the black board, ‘May 18th, Wednesday,’ was written in large lettering. It was easily understood from the written date; beneath it was written, ‘On Duty’, and ‘Takeuchi Ai’.

“It looks like the date the school stopped operating was in May.”

“Yes…”

The date it stopped was May 18th.

The back wall of the classroom was stuck with practice pieces of calligraphy and art. Whichever piece one looked at was dirty due to the dust and a little moldy as well, it made one feel exceptionally painful.

Next to the teaching platform was the teacher’s desk, books and paper were placed just like that on it, and were all covered with dust.

Without meaning to, I used my finger and touched it. Basic texts were placed vertically on the tabletop – these were probably the syllabus texts used by the teacher. On the side were a few bundles of paper, probably the scripts for a test. In the center of the table were 2 notebook-like books.

“It’s the class register.”

When they heard my words, everyone gathered around me.

Although it could be opened, due to the numerous blotches it could not be read. But we could tell that of the 18 students, not a single one was absent. On the last page, ‘May’ was written, but the day the present or absent marks stopped appearing could not be told.

“It is the 18th.”

John said, looking at the blackboard.

“That’s not for certain. It could be that the student on duty that day had

written the next day's date at the end of the day."

"Then in that case it could be the 17th."

"Yeah, if the 18th is a Wednesday, then the 15th would be a Sunday."

Looking from the place where the present/absent marks stopped, counting back based on the number of days in a week, the marks had stopped on the 16th.

"Ah ne, it's only at the 16th."

"So it is."

Ayako looked at the ceiling and spoke, "After taking attendance on the 16th something happened. Bags and the kept animals were all left behind, it's like the school was suddenly abandoned."

"Yeah… sigh, there's also a journal here."

"How nostalgic."

"Ah… can it not be read too?"

"Ye..ah…"

As expected, this was moldy as well. But at least it could be opened, and was not completely illegible. The last page could be seen clearly.

"—May 16th, Monday. Student on Duty: Michiyama Ayumi."

"As expected, the 16th was the last day."

"We're finally going on a trip."

"So that's how it was…"

Ayako snapped her fingers.

"The 17th was the day of the trip, and they were to gather outside the school. Because they did not enter the school, the duty roster for the 18th was written first."

"So that's how it was. After that did something happen on the trip?"

"It looks like it did… look here."

Ayako's coral colored fingernail pointed to the journal.

"It says here that there was a little squabble about the seating arrangements on the bus."

"They took bus to go on a trip…"

Could it be… It shouldn't, right…

"Did this bus get into an accident?"

A possibility that arose was: an accident happened to the bus the students were taking, hence many of the students died. Could all 18 have died? That's why this school, which had lost all its students, stopped operating.

"Was it really like this…?"

John said achingly, looking around the classroom.

In contrast, Boss's voice was incomparably cool.

"—Even if it was like that, why would all the bags be left…?"

I inclined my head in thought.

"Indeed. Talking about it, if these are the remains of the dead, the family would want to collect it."

"First, it's not possible to leave the kept animals all alone even if all the students died."

Because it was Ayako who spoke, I could only nod in agreement.

– The school stopped operating because of an unfortunate accident; because of the drifting spirits of the children… although all this was comprehensible, this was not all there was to it – there should still be something.

If it's just the spirits of the children that appeared, the Village Chief and the others couldn't possibly hide it.

"Are those words true?"

Ayako suddenly asked.

"What?"

"That a holiday village is going to be built near this place. Just looking at this

school, I don’t think that this place has the geographical conditions needed to build a holiday village.”

“The words those foxes speak are not to be trusted.”

“Yeah… indeed. If that’s the case, then why would the Village Chief himself come forth to make a request? Could it be explained if there are facilities for a holiday village near to this place? But if such a plan does not exist, then simply because there are some spirits that appear here, they stop psychics who are just travelling nearby to investigate – is there really this necessity?”

“Could it be because - there are others - who, like us, can get in but not out?”

“If that’s the case, then wouldn’t it be faster to nail up or block up the entrances and exits?”

“It is indeed like this…”

At this time, we heard a minute sound mixed into the sound of the rain.

Chapter 5: August 13th 3pm to 5:30pm

1

I looked at my surroundings.

“What’s up, Mai?”

Upon hearing Ayako’s question, I was just about to say if there was any sound, the minute sound passed once more into my ears.

(---Ah---)

John lifted his head slightly.

(---Ah---Ah---)

The sound of the rain was mixed into it so it wasn’t very clear, but what I heard was definitely a person’s voice. Simultaneous with the voice I also heard some creaking sounds; I lifted my head – the sound appeared to come from above.

“Have you heard the voice yet?”

Ayako also lifted her head to look towards the ceiling.

“There is indeed; it looks like there is something going on up there.”

Just as I spoke, the creaking muddled with the human voice rose once more. Was it the voice of a child or an adult, a male or a female? I couldn’t tell.

“There seems to be something on the second floor—”

Naru was the first to check on the situation in the corridor, with us following behind. The creaking sound was as though there was someone sneaking around the second floor.

Slowly, everyone walked to the base of the staircase, then up one or two steps, and observed the situation on the second floor. Indeed, the second floor was emitting the sound – a small, faraway sound, calling for something.

“I’m going to take a look.”

Just as Lin was about to go up, he was stopped by Naru.

“It’s better not to get separated.”

“But there is a door over there.”

Saying that, Lin looked at the false wall in front of us – there was a small door across that.

“If everyone were to get trapped on the second floor then the situation would be even more disastrous.”

“But—”

“It’ll be fine, Brown-kun.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll leave this place to you then; Matsuzaki-san too.”

Matsuzaki felt unhappy because she was mentioned just in passing. And she had the time to express her dissatisfaction – she really has enough guts.

“Yes! Yes! I know.”

Everyone nodded, then we moved to the side of the false wall. Lin-san opened the latch. Once the door was opened, we could hear the sounds from inside clearly. Although it wasn’t clear what the voice said, it was indeed that of a human.

“We will wait here.”

“We’ll be counting on you.”

Saying that, Lin-san bent his back and went upstairs. To prevent the door from closing, we propped up the door while looking at Lin-san’s diminishing back, continually following Lin-san’s figure until he disappeared beyond the bend. For some reason we felt unsettled.

“Ne, is it really alright to let him go alone?”

“It’s fine, because he isn’t you.”

– It is indeed true to say so; Lin-san is more powerful than we are – this, I’m well aware of. But for some reason I had an extremely distasteful, unsettled feeling in my heart.

“It is exactly as Matsuzaki-san has said.”

John tactfully soothed.

“Yeah…”

Due to the uneasy atmosphere, I could only nod. Just at this time, I felt some random, very large object hurtle from the school, and an extremely powerful impact.

“What was that?!”

Dong! There was a low vibration, and the building creaked and shook. A moment later the surroundings were hit several more times by the impact. I couldn’t help falling to my seat.

The false wall had crumbled; the dust that descended from the ceiling made it impossible to open my eyes.

“What in the world is this?”

Just as Ayako spoke, the resounding footsteps rushed over once more. Although what we heard was the sound of many people running, it could not have possibly been the sound of Lin-san’s footsteps running back – the sound was that of running from the second floor corridor towards our current location; the sound of running and laughter, combined with a few childish cheers.

“Lin-san!”

It’s alright, Lin-san will answer and then come back. In my fright, the door had shut.

“Lin-san!”

Hurriedly grasping the dirty wooden boards, the door opened surprisingly easily.

– It’s good, it’s still good.

“Lin-san, are you alright?! Come back.”

I stuck my head in and called, but there was no reply.

“Lin-san! Do you hear me?”

“—Lin!”

Even Naru’s voice elicited no reply. All at once the surroundings turned completely silent, only the sound of the rain continued on.

– What happened? It was strange.

“I’m going to take a look.”

Naru bent his body and squeezed through, with John following behind. To prevent the door from closing once more, this time Ayako propped it open. At this time, John turned back.

“The two of you shouldn’t stay behind on your own, come along with us.”

Naru nodded.

Ayako opened her mouth and asked, “What about the door?”

I ignored the door Ayako pointed at, and stepped straight up the stairs.

“Let’s worry about Lin-san at this time instead.”

“Yeah… that’s right.”

All of us reached the second floor. On one side of the corridor that stretched straight in front of us were seven classrooms in a row, all of which were practically empty. Looking through the windows facing the corridor, we could tell in a glance if there was anyone there. But we still had to enter every classroom to confirm it.

However, we couldn’t find a glimpse of Lin-san anywhere.

“How could this be…?”

This was the only line I could say.

“He couldn’t have exited the building through the windows, could he?”

John said, while testing the second floor windows once more. Although everyone tested the windows, this place was the second floor; it was not possible to jump out through the windows. If he had opened the window and left, then the window should have been opened. Even I knew that it was impossible for Lin-san to run away on his own.

“Naru, look at this.”

Ayako pointed at the floor by her side. We found black colored stains on the dust on the floor.

“This…”

Naru squatted beside the fist-sized stain, and used his finger to gently touch it, then looked unswervingly at his finger.

“—It looks like blood.”

“Blood? Lin-san’s?”

“I don’t know, but it is indeed fresh blood.”

Why would it fall here?!

“Do you want to take another look? There could be a blind spot somewhere.”

Upon hearing Ayako’s words, everyone nodded.

We thoroughly checked all the windows and classrooms. We had no choice but to admit: the windows could not be opened.

And – Lin-san had vanished.

2

We just stood there like this in the second floor corridor, temporarily stunned.

Nobody spoke, an uneasy heaviness hung in the air; to escape this feeling, I looked towards Naru. He looked as though he was considering something.

“Ne, Lin-san will be fine, won’t he –?”

Naru’s reply made me very depressed.

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?!”

“I’m telling the truth, I don’t know what caused this, and I also don’t know how Lin is now. What we know right now is that Lin is no longer in this school compound.”

He wasn’t in the school compound, but looking through the windows as far as I could see, Lin’s shadow was nowhere to be found.

“How can this happen?”

Repeatedly mumbling to himself; these were the only words he spoke.

– If only we didn’t let him go up alone, if only someone had gone together with him. No! It should be: if only we didn’t let him go at all.

“Regardless, from now on, we must never be alone.”

– It’s already too late to say this now.

Ayako shook me, who hung my head.

“Lin is definitely alright, and doesn’t he have shikigami with him?”

“Yeah…”

“Anyway right now we must be multiply cautious, that’s why we must never be

alone, and try to stay within the group.”

Naru told everyone firmly, and we nodded.

“Don’t leave beyond everyone else’s line of sight, and when anything happens, hold on to the clothing and hands of the person next to you.”

– Yeah.

Nodding my head I repeated Naru’s words silently to remember them. At this time I heard some sound besides that of the rain coming from outside the window. It was the sound of a lot of water splashed around – the sound of a car splashing water.

“It’s Bou-san and the rest!”

I got nearer to the window, and through the grimy glass I could see the white car parked on the field.

“It’s Bou-san!”

“That’s great!”

Ayako’s tone of voice had relaxed as well.

“Have that irreverent monk open the door for us from outside.”

“But, can it be opened -?”

John spoke a little worriedly.

“Although I think it is very likely the door can be opened from the outside, …”

“If it can’t be opened won’t they go ask people and tradesmen etc? Although we don’t know what power has sealed the school, if a bulldozer or something is used, it should still be possible to make an opening.”

Hn, this is over the top as well.

“–Crap!”

I heard Naru’s exclamation, but before I could comprehend it’s meaning, Naru had already started running in the direction of the stairs.

“What’s up?”

“What would we do after it is open?”

– Ai?

Although I didn't understand the reason, it was a case of run first talk later; we exchanged a glance.

Won't the problem be solved once it is opened?

"—Ah!"

It was John who made the sound.

"Ah ha?"

"If after the door is opened, and even Takigawa-san etc are sealed in as well…"

Opening the door wouldn't be a problem, but if the three persons completely ignorant of the situation enter without thinking, and then get sealed in…

If we didn't hurry, and did not wait in front of the door before Bou-san and co reached the outside of the door…

Although we started sprinting, we were stopped in our tracks. "Dong!" The school compound rang once more with an intense sound of an impact, as though some giant object hurtled around the school.

Unable to stand, I was forced to sit. Immediately I grabbed Ayako's hand beside me.

– We definitely could not get separated.

"Dong!" The glass in the windows groaned, the building started tipping, creating an unpleasant sound. It started to continuously hit the classroom's walls, ceiling, and floor; as though recklessly applying a sledgehammer. I couldn't help using my hands to cover my ears.

Ayako loudly chanted,

"归命！普遍！诸金刚！暴恶魔障！" (tl/n: I'm leaving this chant as it was in the Chinese raw. Apparently the Japanese/Chinese translator wasn't too sure about the chant either. Literally, it means: Return to life! All! All Buddha's warrior attendants! Hinder the cruel demons!) All of a sudden the sound stopped, but only for a moment before it started again. I covered my ears in an attempt to block the sound of the impacts that came from below.

Naru was the first to stand up; the stairs were right in front of him.

Who was it preventing us from getting to the entrance hall? Leaning closely against the wall I followed the stairs down, and the banging noise was immediately heard. From beneath the ground were tremors that prevented us from descending; the dust that hailed from above made one blink uncontrollably. Regardless, we had to hurry down.

After that Naru stood at the small door and John also stood next to him. I went over there as well.

The door that was already half rotted away – could not be opened.

“—As expected.”

“Please take a step back.”

Hearing John’s words, I hurriedly retreated; droplets of water stuck to my face.

John shook the small bottle and drew a cross in mid air.

“In the name of the lord I order thou sinister force be gone!”

At the same time Naru kicked hard with his foot, and that little door immediately went flying.

“—how exciting.”

Yasuhara smiled, still holding a dripping umbrella. Masako and Bou-san looked blankly at us.

The sound had stopped sometime ago. Only the rain could be heard.

Then we looked at the three of them. The door behind them was closed.

3

“Bou-san! The door!”

I pointed behind Bou-san; he turned around, shocked.

“Ai?”

Bou-san was momentarily stunned, and then he reached out to pull the door.

Then, as expected, the door already could not be opened.

“—what in the world?”

We descended from the stairs. Yasuhara and Masako, who were unaware of the situation, went forward; John, Bou-san and I pushed the door together. But the door would not move an inch.

“—it can’t be opened.”

“That shouldn’t be possible, we just entered from outside—”

Hearing Masako’s words I turned my head.

“It can’t be opened anymore, we’ve been closed in.”

“—Ai?”

“It was like this after you guys left. The windows couldn’t be opened; even the glass could not be broken.”

Wu – everyone was silent.

“—then this is troublesome!”

For good or bad, Bou-san spoke a line.

“What happened? How is it, that our headcount isn’t right-?”

Bou-san looked at us; I couldn’t help clutching my chest.

– Lin-san had vanished.

“Where are Lin and Ayako?”

– Ai?

I confirmed all the members: Naru, Bou-san, John, Yasuhara, Masako, – Ayako wasn’t there.

“How can this be?”

Turning my head to look, John, too, wore a disbelieving expression.

“When did she disappear - ?”

“She was still there while we were in the corridor.”

“When we ran down she was still there too. During the disturbance everyone was knocked to the ground, after that we stood up –”

John lifted his head to look at the stairs.

“Mai also stood up—”

His golden hair had been gripped into a bundle.

“No, at that time I had already let go of her hand and went off first—”

“Then it’s not John’s fault.”

“But—”

“I also remembered we had to hold each other’s hands, but we got separated —”

What in the world actually happened? How did Lin-san and Ayako disappear?

In a moment, the feelings of regret came upon me in a torrent. Since the start of the investigation, the most painful thing is the moment one realizes how minute ones strength is.

“Things that have past can no longer be changed.”

“Bou-san… but…”

“Regrets breed regrets; it’s better to just do the things you have to do now. – What we have to do now is handle Ayako’s situation, right?”

“—Yeah.”

Bou-san looked towards Naru.

“What should we do? Should we search the first and second floors separately?”

“It’s better not to split up.”

“True as well. Then let’s start on the second floor.”

All of us walked in the direction of the second floor. We passed through the already door-less deviding wall, and just as we were about to ascend the stairs, Bou-san, who was walking in front, stopped.

“—What’s up?”

There was a wider space right above the stairs. (Looking towards) the right hand branch of the corridor, the left side of which was suddenly filled with colored paper.

“—!”

I couldn’t help stopping in my tracks, looking at the wall.

“How could this be—?”

“This really is going too far.”

Bou-san spat out.

Streamers dangled from the ceiling; colored paper was cut up and joined in a flower chain. Many tendrils decorated the ceiling, and tissue paper flowers decorated a shredded gold colored paper.

On it was written – “Congratulations! Ayako-san!”

4

All those colored paper were already faded, with spots on them; the tissue-paper like paper was also badly stained. We took all these paper down and burnt them.

Returning to the entrance hall, we started up the bonfire that had already extinguished. After we related the happenings to Bou-san etc who went to buy things, Yasuhara said: “We are completely stuck in a predicament.”

“It looks to be so.”

I nodded, but Yasuhara shook his head instead.

“When we asked the people who sought shelter at the supermarket where we shopped at, most people refused to speak of this place. Once in a while there were some who said not to get close to the school and such.”

“—Ai?”

“We felt there was something up, so we went to the local library. Regardless of how it was explained, it still felt very strange that the school was closed in May 5 years ago, so we dug out the newspapers that were published then, and came easily to a conclusion. – This is a photocopy.”

Yasuhara took out a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket.

“Yamatusnami.”

“Ai?”

“Do you still remember? The landslide 5 years ago: cars, houses – everything was swept away; many people died.”

“Now that you mentioned it – something like that did happen.”

I had a vague impression of it. The scene of tea-colored earth collapsing and

falling to the ground, and that of heavy vehicles used to retrieve buried vehicles from the mud, *etc.*

"That—"

John's face was filled with confusion. Yasuhara and I looked at John.

"Oh yes, John doesn't know of this incident."

"Because, 5 years ago I wasn't in Japan yet, that's why I don't know."

"I remember it –, indeed, I think the landslide happened on a motorway."

"Yes, that's the one."

"I remember the newspapers and (broadcasting) networks at that time were full of this. Due to deforestation the earth had softened, on top of that there was a long period of rain, which resulted in a landslide. Buses and cars and the houses by the roadside were all swallowed by the earth. Amongst them was a tour bus. And everybody on board died: they were all the students of a branch of a school, and the school also shut down. It was described as a 'tragic closure' and such; I still remember the scene of a black clad old man locking up the school gates."

Yasuhara nodded.

"It was a major event which caused 26 deaths and 16 people to be seriously injured. Amongst the dead were the 18 students returning from a trip, the teacher in charge of them, the bus driver and tour guide; and there were 2 cars which were also swept away – the drivers died on the spot; 4 houses by the roadside were also swept away, with 3 deaths, making a total of 26."

– I hate this type of topic; it makes one feel very depressed.

"Because the school lost all its students at the same time, and there were no new enrolments the next year, in reality it meant closing the school. The second year after the reservoir was completed, there was indeed a village that moved away; but in reality the exodus was before this incident, and has no relation to the school's closure."

"—if this is the case, then why would they tell such a big lie?"

"The problem is right here, –first, following convention to appease the dead,

we heard a large memorial was built near to the site. Disregarding this first, in reality, the situations that affected the people involved in this incident (occurred in this place), so the problem is right here."

– !

"According to accounts from youths from the library, 'the dead primary school children call for companions as they are lonely' – there are such rumors; and, 'therefore there are children who go missing in the mountains nearby'."

"That can't be…"

"Takigawa-san and Hara-san both helped to check, and indeed there are many incidents of children going missing. And these incidents did indeed start happening frequently starting 5 years ago. Taking June 5 years ago as the start, every 3 to 4 months, a child would go missing; but last year it all stopped suddenly."

– ??

Yasuhara's brow wrinkled slightly.

"To be precise the last incident was October last year. From the newspapers, it looks like the disappearances have stopped for a year and a half. – Why was that? Don't you think it's strange?"

"Strange?"

Naru spoke,

"What the Village Chief and co came to request, should be related to these disappearances. – if that's the case it means that the disappearances did not stop, although there might be some time between disappearances. At least, it's not possible that it ceased completely; that the newspaper did not report it, is probably because arrangements were made prior to the incident in order to prevent it being reported."

Yasuhara gently clapped his hands with the paper.

"Brilliant! – On the way back we went nearby to check it out, and asked, 'do you know the news of a child going missing a couple of days ago?' Although we tried very hard to fish out a story, the answer was still, 'why do you ask about

this type of thing?’ and denials of any incidents of disappearances – they wouldn’t say anything at all.”

“So that’s the case—”

Naru mumbled to himself.

“At the very least, ‘a couple of days ago’ a disappearance had occurred. What happened to the children that disappeared?”

Yasuhara’s expression turned serious simultaneously.

“What’s more suspicious here is that, at the beginning, when the children who disappeared were found, they were all already dead.”

“At the beginning?”

“From the June 5 years ago – till about a year later.”

“And after this?”

“They were not found.”

Naru was once again, forcing a smile.

“Could you be actually waiting for me to ask where the bodies were found?”

Yasuhara scratched his head embarrassedly.

“You really are annoying, if you know then don’t be so naughty, I’m waiting.”

“Where were they found?”

“Halfway up the mountain of 騰矢字支野田.”

“Is this the same as the location of the school?”

“The same.”

“So that’s the case, it was actually like this—”

– I completely did not understand what they were talking about.

“That… excuse me…”

I was clearly already asking nervously; Naru’s heartless reply still hit me on the head.

“Your brain is really useless.”

– it’s none of your business!

“In other words, the situation is like this –”

Saying that, Naru’s dark gaze turned to the school compound, which was already submerged in dusk.

“A month after May 5 years ago, when all the students in this school died in the accident, a child disappeared, and the body was found in this school.”

“—Yeah.”

“After the tragedy, in order to prevent people from investigating, they made it such that to inquire about the abandoned school one could only use its registered name.”

“ –??”

“However, within a year, similar incidents continued to happen, so to locals it would definitely feel very strange; even amongst unrelated individuals, there would definitely be someone curious about the place 腾矢野, where the bodies are found. – Hence they decided to announce to the outside world that they did not find any bodies after that.”

Yasuhara cut in,

“Or else, they found the bodies but pretended not to have found them, or taking one step further, they could have hidden the bodies.”

“—that they do it to this extent, – let’s not talk about this first. Because the disappearances continue to happen unceasingly, the volume of tourists will be affected, so financially the income from tourism is insufficient. In order to prevent the newspapers from leaking the news they made arrangements, but despite that, the disappearances still continue.”

“That’s why they would consult us?”

“It’s such a situation. From the decision of the Village Chief and co, I can see that while they really want to prevent the continuation of the disappearances, they are very afraid of the details of the situation being known. On the other hand they are afraid that psychics are difficult to find, and they also have to confirm the abilities of the psychics. Just as they have run out of options, they

encounter, by chance, psychics who arrive at this place.”

Ah— ah— Why would I feel anger rising?

“Just like this? Just because they are afraid of the disappearances being known that they weave a huge web of lies to trick us, to make us come to this place? We don’t know the actual situation, they don’t even tell us how dangerous this place really is. At least if we knew the situation before hand we wouldn’t have carelessly gotten sealed up like this. How can they be so despicable!?”

They caused Lin-san and Ayako to both –

“And not only that.”

Naru looked at Yasuhara.

“Are you hiding anything else?”

Yasuhara smiled embarrassedly.

“—you caught me. The victims of the disappearances that were reported in the news – almost all were tourists. Children from the nearby campsite or ski resort have disappeared without anyone noticing.”

“Ah—ah, so that’s the case, if it’s like this it will indeed affect visitor volumes.”

– It’s so despicable, to let ignorant people come to this place, almost to become a sacrifice. How can they be so low?

“—but, if it’s like this…”

John asked cautiously.

“—Yeah?”

“The victims of the disappearances – those people aren’t still here, are they?”

Still… here…

“Your meaning is…”

“Regardless of what happened, if they found a body they’d pretend they did not find it, and the body might even have been hidden somewhere. If we search the school we might even find a body, but even if we find one, it might not necessarily be good news – that’s what I think.”

If this is the case—

Naru nodded.

“Then the bodies of the victims who disappeared over the past 4 years – the chance of them being in the school is very high.”

5

“You’ve got to be kidding—”

I hurriedly stood up and looked all around, and also whacked Bou-san with my hand.

“Haven’t we already searched the school several times? If it’s an easily found location, we would have already found it.”

“It is indeed so, but—”

“If the bodies rotted away, the stench would not completely disappear. If it’s an obvious location, we wouldn’t be sitting around so leisurely.”

“—Yeah—”

“Perhaps we should search for where the bodies are hidden.”

The only one who could say such horrendous words would have to be Naru.

“You’re joking, right?”

“I’m not joking. Suppose that our enemy, or an animal that hoards its prey in its nest, has a habit of hoarding in a particular location, then Lin and Matsuzaki-san would probably be there.”

– Ah!

Thinking about it to this point, I suddenly felt a chill down my back.

Are they still alive? – Or—

I desperately wrecked my brains; such a thing couldn’t possibly happen: the two of them couldn’t be dead – stop thinking like this, about such inauspicious thing!

“To put it literally it’s the grave. Just thinking about it chills me to the core.”

“Are you afraid?”

“It’s very interesting.”

Uncle, you’re such a liar.

“It’ll be a little difficult to relax, but it’s still better to go and search.”

Naru nodded, and looked straight at Masako.

“Hara-san, do you feel anything?”

“What I can clearly detect are spirits with extremely weak presences – probably the spirits of the victims who disappeared; there are more than 20 of them.”

“Masako, it takes such a long time to get a simple answer out of you.” (tl/n: sarcasm) Bou-san said laughingly. Masako turned her head angrily to a side.

“Are they all children?”

“Because there isn’t much presence that’s why I can’t feel it. – But I can clearly tell some have turned a little gloomy or lively.”

“Where are they?”

“They aren’t gathered around one spot, they drift around the school.”

“Do you feel anything else?”

Masako frowned slightly.

“I feel a huge distortion: at this place there are a lot of spirits with very strong fates gathered around. But their individual presences have mixed and meshed, so I can’t tell the exact situation, neither do I know the exact location. It’s like it’s very carefully hidden.”

“So that’s the case – do you feel the presence of Matsuzaki-san?”

Masako shook her head.

“Starting from just now, I was already thinking that I couldn’t feel them already –”

“Is that so. – If that’s the case, then try looking for a lead.”

– Yeah.

“What does everyone here have on them?”

When Naru was asking that question, I was spacing out. After I realized it I hurriedly searched my body. I only had my watch, and the plastic bags used just now to collect the wires.

“I only—only have my watch—”

“Idiot, who asked you for that?”

Once again, Naru rained on my parade.

– Didn’t you ask what we had on us?

“I only have some holy water and a cross rosary.”

It was John who answered thus. Bou-san reached into his vest pocket and took out a 独怙杵. (tl/n: no idea what this is.) “I have this, and a refillable lighter.”

“A Buddhist rosary and a bit of salt.”

Was Masako’s reply.

So that was what he was asking about. *blush* I didn’t have anything, and neither did Yasuhara.

“That means that we only have minimum preparation,” Naru said.

“Anyway, definitely do not get separated, and take note of Bou-san and John’s positions. Don’t increase the distance between people, and definitely do not go beyond reaching distance. If anything happens, grab the people around you immediately.”

– Yeah, got it.

“Once again we will investigate all the classrooms, including the floors and walls – give all of them a knock to check if there are any abnormalities.”

Yes! This time I honestly raised my hand in question.

“What if we don’t discover any abnormalities anywhere?”

“Under those circumstances the location the bodies are kept is outside the school, then we search for a way to get out.”

“—got it!”

6

We first went to the second floor where Lin-san and Ayako disappeared.

“The bodies may be in a place where we cannot see, but we do not have a clue about where we should start looking. At this point we can only look for any places that feel strange, or look at whether the planks of the stairs can be dismantled; besides that count the footprints left in the dust, and see if there are any other things left behind.”

We would pay special attention to the classrooms where blood was found when Lin-san disappeared, and where the nasty message of ‘Congratulations, Ayako-san!’ was found.

Lastly, after prying up each plank of wood to check, we found nothing unusual.

The rain outside the window had started to ease; the weak light passing through the thick clouds was practically useless. Furthermore since we were really about to enter dusk, it’d have been impossible to investigate.

The worry in my heart increased yet another degree. Entering the classroom nearest to me, it was filled with worthless things.

“There isn’t anything at all!”

We crawled on the ground to search for anything that might have dropped on the dust, and to check if there were any suspicious places on the floor boards.

“Ayako – answer me!”

“Annoying! You’re always shouting loudly like this – be a little stronger in this type of situation!”

“—Mai!”

Masako called me, as though to criticize.

“Yeah—if I didn’t say anything then I’d get demoralized.”

Masako only gave an it-can’t-be-helped smile, and didn’t say anything.

I moved a box that was in the way onto a table that was by the side. After that I noticed a few pieces of ceiling board that had very large stains on them, and felt the distance between the boards were abnormally large; and the joints between the boards also had severe dirty grey stains, which looked like they were still expanding; it also felt like it was shaking mildly.

“What is that?”

While everyone lifted their heads to look up, I peeled my eyes and noticed a small flying black object: a black, small object was flying near to the ceiling boards.

– an insect.

Thinking about it brought a wave of nausea.

“—Mai, that is –”

“Stop!”

Masako and I grasped each other.

– How disgusting, it really made me want to vomit.

The ceiling boards of the second floor were all stained. Perhaps the rain from the outside had soaped in; the filth from above soaked up water and dripped down.

But the color of the filth here was completely different; it was so dark that it was almost a burnt brown. And the insects – those insects fully filled the joint between the ceiling boards.

Bou-san climbed onto the tabletop, reached out and gently tapped the ceiling. Suddenly hearing the buzzing of moving wings, I couldn’t help shirking and clamping my hands over my ears. All at once, black insects were flying all around me.

“Good fellow! – this is getting really interesting, -- John, take care of Mai and

Masako and go to the corridor; young man (Yasuhara), you too.”

“Yes!”

John shielded us and let us to the corridor. When we walked through the door I couldn’t help lifting my head to look at the ceiling; the ceiling of the corridor and that of the classroom were not too different.

“Naru, do you have a stick or something?”

Naru, who was standing by the side of the table, took a long broomstick and handed it to Bou-san; we grasped each other’s hands tightly and stood at the door.

“Bou-san – don’t.”

My voice was shaking a little.

“That won’t do!”

Saying that, he used the stick to push the corner of the ceiling board gently upwards.

“Normally it should be a large movable wooden board. – This piece?”

The piece of ceiling board next to the blackboard and the windows moved. All at once we saw countless black insects swarming out. Bou-san fanned them away, then stood on the table to push the approximately 4 meter square board. All of a sudden, a gust of wind brought forth a terrible stench.

“—Gross!”

Crap, I really wanted to vomit. I hurriedly covered my face with my handkerchief, but such an object completely could not block that wave of smell. Bou-san had also jumped down from the table due to the stench; he glared at the ceiling with a deep frown.

“It looks like it’s up there—”

Naru merely wrinkled his brow before nodding.

“What should we do, Naru?”

“It looks like we have to confirm it – although I don’t think it will be up there.”

Did he mean Lin-san and Ayako? I suddenly felt a bout of dizziness. A conscious human being, or even an unconscious person – I don't think one could stay in that stench-filled sort of space.

"As expected, then… then am I the one to go?"

"If you're scared, I can go instead."

"Bou-san! Don't go!"

I called back Bou-san. – This – I knew we needed to confirm it, but—but—

Bou-san moved the table to the corner of the classroom.

"Let's do it like this: I'll go take a look!"

"Just a look, OK?!"

"If I were to climb up, the ceiling will collapse!"

Naru took down a piece of glass that was facing the corridor, and placed it slanting by Bou-san's feet, who was standing on the table and chair, to reflect the weak sunlight from outside above the ceiling.

"As expected, it won't work unless I use a lighter!"

"I think it'll be safer not to use that thing, – and it's better not to breath the air inside there."

Bou-san's face turned serious, then he used one hand to support the ceiling board before sticking his head into the ceiling. After a while he quietly withdrew from the ceiling and bent his body.

"Bou-san—?"

After replacing the ceiling board, Bou-san heaved a sigh of relief before sitting down on the floor.

"It doesn't work – I practically cannot see a thing!"

"What about Ayako and Lin-san?"

Just as I was asking,

Suddenly clattering sounds came from inside the ceiling – the small sound of some things chasing each other. Looking up at the ceiling, shocked, the ceiling

board appeared to be shaking.

No! It wasn’t merely shaking: the center of the whole ceiling board was moving violently.

The shaking rapidly spread horizontally, then suddenly a black hole split through the ceiling, and something from inside slid out.

With just a moment’s glance at the object, I immediately cried tragically and shut my eyes tightly!

“—No!”

It was the wet sound of a hard object dropping down.

Chapter 6: August 13th 5.30pm to 8pm

1

“It’s alright, it’s alright.”

Only when I heard John’s voice did I carefully open my eyes.

“Open your eyes, it’s alright, just look in a different direction and it’ll be fine.”

Encouraged by John’s gentle persuasion, I opened my eyes with fear; what appeared in front of me was John. John’s body just blocked the doorway – like this I couldn’t see inside, and I gently let out a breath.

– It stank! Masako and Yasuhara held each other’s hands and slowly retreated along the wall and also stood where they couldn’t see inside.

“John, take them to the entrance hall.”

Came Bou-san’s voice from inside.

“Right. Come on – let’s go back.”

John’s strange accent triggered my mixed sobs and laughs.

Holding on to John we went back to the entrance hall through the barricade. There were windows on the left side of the entrance hall facing the field; I stuck my nose through where the glass was broken and took a deep breath.

The damp smell of rain was so refreshing.

After a very long time, only after it had already turned dark outside the entrance hall, did Bou-san and Naru return. The moment the pair of them entered the

barrier I smelt a mild stench. After such a long time, to see them both return, finally allowed me some peace.

“What’s the situation now?”

Upon hearing John’s enquiry, Bou-san shrugged.

“It’s still good; I think it’ll scare the young ladies to death if they had to pass by that area, so we used the gym mats from the next classroom to cover it.”

Gr—great – thanks, Bou-san.

“Is that, as expected – a body?”

At this point, Bou-san nodded his head tiredly.

“It’s already in that state, so it couldn’t possibly still be living. – It was an adult!”

This made all of us very surprised.

“Adult?”

Bou-san and Naru slumped exhaustedly onto the concrete floor.

“Water, -- right, it was an adult; it wasn’t just children who disappeared.”

“Takigawa-san, which is your cup?”

“The one with the dragon printed on it. – Because a child had disappeared, adults came up to this place to search. After that, a group, like ours, was sealed in. Amongst them one person disappeared, after which there was no meaning for them to continue searching. Hence the body was abandoned here. – the above is Naru’s theory.”

– I increasingly felt that that group was the lowest of the low; if they had told us beforehand then we wouldn’t be caught unprepared like this. Both the Village chief and that assistant were unforgivable.

Yasuhara poured the tea and handed the cups to Bou-san and Naru.

“Here, Shibuya-san’s is the cup with the fox right? – And then? What about Matsuzaki-san and Lin-san?”

“Because I didn’t see all the way inside, I can’t be sure, but it looks like they

weren’t there.”

“– there was only the body? –”

“I don’t think I saw a living person.”

What strange words. I glared at Bou-san.

“Does that mean that there was a living animal then?”

The moment the question left my mouth, Bou-san’s expression changed.

“To say what there was – I really didn’t see it clearly.”

“What?”

“What it was, I don’t know either; to say ‘what’–”

– What was Bou-san talking about—?

“Although I don’t know what it was, if I were to describe it with the vocabulary I can use, then what I saw was a ‘hungry ghost’.”

“Ai—?”

“—a ghost which was about the size of a child.”

2

For a moment, everyone was silent.

“What is a hungry ghost?”

“In Sanskrit it is called a preta, which transliterates from ‘Pra Ita’. Literally, it means ‘one who is gone forth’, translating from the Chinese it simply refers to a ghost, which I think is more accurate. What we call a ‘ghost’ really refers to a deceased person; because it awaits its descendents to offer food, it is known as a ‘hungry ghost’. – On this topic, at the very beginning –”

“Were there such things in the past?”

“This theory was spread by Buddhism. It refers to ghosts of people who were evil while they were still alive, who reap their karma as hungry ghosts, which are spirits that have to continuously endure the pain of hunger. Their bodies are very thin, their necks as slender as a needle. Even if they came by some hard-to-find food, they are unable to swallow it; if they forcibly ate it, the food would turn immediately into fire – something completely inedible.”

“Scary–”

“Maintaining their constant endurance of the pain of hunger, the dead for whom burial was not held and whose identity is thus unknown are known as ‘hungry ghosts’. They are normally described as small ghosts which have limbs like dried twigs, and bellies bloated outwards like a large drum.”

– As expected, Bou-san is a monk after all. I was already gasping in admiration.

“Then… then is there a hungry ghost up there?”

“I only saw something like that; I don’t believe that a child had committed a sin that deserved the punishment of becoming a hungry ghost. Firstly, I don’t believe in hungry ghosts and stuff – that is just a product of people’s

imagination. – But if the children were starved for some reason, that might be why I saw that image.”

He said, as he directed his gaze towards the ceiling with an extremely serious expression.

“It looks like this really is the field where Takigawa-san can showcase his abilities.”

When Yasuhara said that about him, Bou-san wrinkled his brow.

“Isn’t there a festival to feed the hungry ghosts? That is for the exclusive purpose of appeasing the hungry ghosts, isn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, this is simply for commemorating the dead – the type that is performed during the Feast of All Souls / Hungry Ghost Festival(15th day of 7th Lunar Month).”

“Oh, that, - I didn’t think it would actually be that.”

“Right! That… when the corpse fell down it appeared like there was someone moving above the ceiling boards, wasn’t there?”

When he heard my words, Bou-san quietly replied.

“It looks like it.”

“Could it be – is it that?”

“It could be; I don’t know the real situation either! All I know for sure is that this place is very dangerous, and the earlier we get out the better!”

We sank once more into silence. That we had to get out as soon as possible was common knowledge. But what about how to rescue Lin-san and Ayako?

“Let’s relax a little! To continue in silence like this wouldn’t change anything. Whose cup is the one with the swan?”

John raised his hand when he heard Yasuhara’s words.

“Thanks, that’s mine.”

“No need for thanks, no need; whose is the one with the rabbits?”

– Rabbits.

Masako replied, somewhat reluctantly.

“It’s Matsuzaki-san’s.”

“Following that –”

Yasuhara’s expression had changed slightly. He poured tea into all the cups.

“Thanks.”

No one’s hands contacted those 2 cups.

“Young man, you are shaken deep inside, aren’t you?”

“Ya la! And you expose me once again.”

“It looks like you haven’t had enough practice.”

“All in all I’m still an inexperienced young man! I really want to mature into an impressive man like you, Takigawa-san.”

“I’m currently in a bad mood, so don’t make fun of me.”

Yasuhara smiled and said,

“Hey hey… did you choose this one?”

“Ah?”

“I’m only curious whether you’re objecting because you’re in a bad mood, or if you’re objecting to my youth?”

“I say, you fellow…”

“You mean to say you admit you’re a middle aged man –”

“In any case this old man is Japan’s number one…”

“That’s Mount Fuji!”

“In any case this old man is Momotaro’s subordinate—” (J-C tl’s note: then wouldn’t Naru be Momotaro? Lin is the dog, then who is the monkey?) “That’s Mr Pheasant!” (tl/n: The tale of Momotaro is told in Japanese folklore – Momotaro’s subordinates are the pheasant, the monkey and the dog.) “Any-any how, my breakfast—” (tl/n: my guess is that they are starting to sing nursery rhymes here.) “I ate a bun for breakfast. – This is forcing it a little.”

“Yeah…”

Grin!

That humans can still smile in a situation like this, really is impressive.

I thought while I smiled.

I reached my hand out to the side, and picked up the cup that was between mine and Yasuhara’s.

3

“This cup is mine.”

It was a little girl who held the cup.

…

– This child…

Ah ne, how did I…

“The one with the doggies belongs to 高户(Takaru?)-kun!”

There was an even smaller boy in the direction of the girl’s gaze. I stared blankly at everyone’s faces.

Yasuhara blinked and grinned bitterly.

“We’re in trouble here, how can you space out like this?”

“Ai? – Yeah, perhaps I was spacing out again.”

“Mai nee-san (older sister) is weird!”

Mariko(鞠子=Kikuko/Maiko/Mariko I’m just picking one at random) started giggling.

– Right, this child is Mariko. How did I know? How could I space out again?

“Sorry Mariko, I probably am rather tired.”

“Aren’t you half-sleepwalking?”

Bou-san said with a bitter grin.

“As if! – I’m sorry; Takaru-kun’s is the one with the doggies, here!”

“Thank you!”

I smiled at Takaru-kun. However, for some unknown reason, my heart was

filled with panic. What happened here? – What is the meaning of this sort of feeling? I glanced at everyone – all their faces were filled with worry.

“What’s up? Mai nee-san and everyone are all very weired.”

“Yes… indeed…”

As though to dispel something, Bou-san spoke, “The sun is going to set very soon, if we still don’t think up an effective countermeasure…”

Naru nodded.

“Do not, in any case, fall into their trap.”

Naru’s voice sounded like he was telling it to himself; what I did not expect was to see Naru actually wearing an expression of stupefaction.

“I think the body just now was also a trap.”

“A trap?”

“Because if everyone panicked because of that, and ran blindly out of the classroom, they could have made any one of us disappear!”

Is this so—

Bou-san suddenly started laughing.

“This—could you be over-thinking this? Disappear? How can we disappear?”

I was slightly shocked.

“How can you start joking? Right now, aren’t Lin-san and Aya—”

– Ai?

Mariko looked uncomprehendingly at me.

“Mai nee-san, who is Lin-san?”

“This…”

Bou-san smiled grimly.

“You bastard are completely dream-walking!”

“Ah ne?”

Masako also looked at me, shocked.

“Mai’s the best at dreaming with her eyes open.”

“Oh, shut up; my mind is only just slightly wandering a bit.”

“Only just slightly? You’re mind has really wandered far away, - who said that?”

I inclined my head in thought.

“Who said that?”

“Have you forgotten what you’ve said yourself?”

“This…”

Ah ne –? Who was it who said to come over?

“Let’s ignore this huge idiot.”

Naru said coldly.

“Bou-san, has a barrier been set up here yet?”

“It can be set up; but do we have to go to this extent?”

Naru frowned.

“Indeed, but it’s always better to be more cautious.”

But – it was Yasuhara who spoke.

“If we wait cautiously in the barrier the danger would be reduced, but if we were to leave this place wouldn’t any path be equally dangerous?”

“Yes…”

Bou-san nodded.

“I concur with the young man, Yasuhara. Rather than hiding in here we should take the initiative and attack; I want to hurry up and start exorcising already. To ask this old man to wait here like this for death is simply not possible.”

John also nodded in agreement.

“Yeah… there are also children amongst us, we still have to consider how to set forth.”

Indeed.

I looked at the 2 children sitting honestly in a corner. Mariko was 11, Takaru, 9; we had to protect the two of them regardless.

“There already are safety measures. But when night falls there will be spirits that become active. Shouldn’t we consider a slightly more proactive method of escape?”

After some hesitation, Naru nodded.

“Yeah—First, we have to look for a way out. Fortunately this school is built with wood; let’s try if we can bore a hole.”

Bou-san nodded.

“How should we do it? We don’t have tools.”

“First search each classroom for anything that can be used as a tool, if we can’t find any then we’ll use fire.”

“Burn it? Isn’t that too much?!”

“We’ll just smoke it, to make to wooden boards more fragile. If that still doesn’t work then we’ll look for a way to force the spirits into an impasse.”

“Force them into an impasse?”

“Force the spirits into a specific location, then perform exorcism there.”

“Ah—is that the plan?”

“Everyone will search within the school. Hara-san, can you check out the situation in each of the classrooms?”

“Alright!”

4

Following behind Masako, who was checking the situation in the classrooms, the row of us searched each classroom. Soon, we found empty bottles in which we placed wood chips and lit to be used as lamps. However, in reality we still depended on touch to search for things.

After the two children heard John's words, they, too, helped to search.

"Children, listen properly! We are searching for hard objects, ok?!"

"Yes!"

"Got it!"

We classified the props that were in the classroom. I watched Mariko and Takaru, who were enthusiastically helping, closely. They chatted with John while energetically searched with their dust covered hands. From time to time they'd forget their job and start playing; after a mild admonishment from John, they'd immediately start helping again.

This should be a hilarious scenario – it should be such at least, shouldn't it? – But why – why would it be so –?

"What's up, Taniyama?"

Yasuhara asked.

"I don't know; I just feel rather uncomfortable inside –"

"Are you alright? You haven't caught a cold, have you?"

"It's not that. It's not the type of discomfort brought on by sickness. But for some reason my chest feels tight with worry, it's like there's something stuck in my throat – it's extremely uncomfortable…"

Yasuhara's face was filled with worry.

“Do you feel like this too?”

“Too? Do you feel the same as well?”

“Yeah – for some unknown reason, here – this place, it’s like it is being blocked by something.”

“Yeah…”

Yasuhara lowered his voice, his gaze turning to the the two children by John’s side.

“Do you feel very strange looking at Mariko and Takaru?”

“Do you feel that way too, Yasuhara? Me too – whenever I look at them I feel like there’s some terrible thing about to happen and feel very nervous.”

“Me too. What in the world is going on?!”

“Could it be that because this place is too dangerous, and to have children in this type of circumstances…?”

“Perhaps – it probably is like this.”

I knew it was very dangerous, but besides that there was still something…

I shook my head, dived into the chest and continued sorting the assorted items.

“It’s annoying – there’re so many of them. I feel like I’m getting a little scared.”

“I’m like this as well…”

Saying that, puzzlement suddenly showed on Yasuhara’s face.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing much – it’s like there’s something not quite right just now—”

He tilted his head in thought. A voice came from behind me.

“Did you find anything?”

John stood up and looked at us. He pulled Takaru and Mariko on either side. Behind him was the lamp; the flickering light made their expressions appear exceptionally dark.

This – I somehow felt that I had seen an extremely unsettling picture.

5

There wasn't a single tool that could be used to break the walls in the first floor classrooms.

When we went up to the second floor, the little door was no longer attached and was propped up by the side. When I passed through the entrance, I somehow felt something extremely discomforting; I, too, couldn't identify the cause of this discomfort.

Searching the practically empty classrooms, I felt my way to the inner most classroom. There weren't any tools here either.

"From the looks of it, we can only use the most dangerous method then—"

Bou-san's words received a nod from Naru.

"Ah—"

Is it alright to use fire?

Just as I was thinking such and about to walk out of the classroom, Yasuhara, who was walking behind Mariko and Takaru, suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"Yasuhara?!"

Yasuhara's expression was extremely strange.

"Oni-san (big brother), what's up?"

When he heard Mariko's voice, Yasuhara immediately took 2 steps back – Yasuhara was alone in the classroom now.

"What's up, oni-san(big brother)? You're very strange!"

Takaru said, smiling.

I called Naru and the others, who were about to go to the corridor, back.

“Naru, wait—Yasuhara? What’s up? Naru and the rest are about to leave!”

“Taniyama – the car!”

“Ai?”

“Why would there be two vehicles?”

Why—two?

Just as I was stunned speechless…

That moment, I don’t know how to describe that moment. Suddenly the classroom’s walls spat fire, engulfing Yasuhara.

It was as though somebody set the fire deliberately, it was indeed that type of sound. Blinding flames filled my vision; in a blink of an eye there was only a wall of flames in front of me.

“—Ya! – Ah!!!”

“Yasuhara?!”

“Hey!”

The classroom was filled with smoke, as was the corridor.

— Why did this happen?

– How could it? It was impossible.

“Yasuhara!!”

“Mai! Hold it! Run away quickly!”

Masako gripped my wrist.

“But, Yasuhara, he—”

“Please, don’t mess around!!”

Masako shielded her head with her hand. I looked at Masako, then at the sea of flames in front of me. I sighed a deep sigh. I called it a sigh, but I was really choking back tears.

Holding tightly on to Masako, who was holding on to me as well, I shut my eyes.

The fire continued for a quite a few minutes, then suddenly diminished, and in an instance, it was extinguished.

The lamp remained inside the classroom where the fire had taken place. There weren't any signs of a fire, there wasn't even any smoke. It was as though the fire that had just happened was a complete lie. But at the same time, the things that should have been there had vanished. Needless to say, Yasuhara; the junk that was scattered across the floor, the pictures stuck to the walls, and even the heaps of dust on the floor had all disappeared. It was as though someone had done a thorough cleaning, all of it – not a thing remained.

"It looks like it's not possible to use fire."

When I heard Naru's cool voice, I looked blankly at him. In reality, I felt very dissatisfied inside.

– At a time like this, is this a time for such calm discussion?

"Looks to be so, ya ne ya ne!"

When I heard Bou-san's voice, I turned. Masako also appeared to have been shocked.

"Bou-san!"

Bou-san sighed, then patted Masako's and my head.

"Control yourselves, the two of you, do not cry!"

How could this be? Facing me, who was stunned speechless, was Yasuhara's (tl/n: this is most probably a mistake in the Chinese raw) worried face.

"You guys must have had a shock."

"A shock? How can you call it that?"

At this time, someone tugged my clothes.

"What's up, Mai-nee-san(big sister)?"

"Mariko, just now…"

When I looked towards Mariko's face, I completely forgot what I was about to say.

I looked strangely at the 3 children in front of me.

Chapter 7: August 13th 8pm to 11pm

1

At the vestibule, Naru and Bou-san were discussing exorcism; I looked blankly at the rain falling outside. But it was already dark, so all I could see was the mirror-like glass.

“It’s really embarrassing!”

Said Masako, who was sitting beside me, softly.

“… Yeah!”

“Even I was also stunned. Although it was a very large fire, I never thought that I would actually cry because of witnessing it.”

Listening to the tone of her voice it appeared like she was really very frustrated with herself.

“Indeed…”

“Mai-nee-san, Masako-nee-san, can I drink juice?”

Takaru asked.

“Of course, I’ll pour it for you. Which cup belongs to you, Takaru?”

“The puppy one!” (which was originally Lin’s) “The puppy one it is, I’ve got it; what about Mariko?”

“The bunny one!” (which was originally Ayako’s) “Ok, then Tsumura?(津村)’s is the crab one, then!”

“Yeah!”

“Tsumura, don’t spill it, ok?”

Mariko warned Tsumura; he was Mariko’s younger brother.

I looked at the lovable pair of siblings in front of me, then directed my gaze out of the window.

What is wrong with me – to be so anxious and unsettled – to be so unreasonably depressed? The rain started falling once more in the darkness; the glow from the bonfire shone through the glass and water droplets, creating a dim red glow; outside, the vague shadow of the two vehicles could be seen.

– Two – vehicles—

I blanked for a moment. It would be better to ask everyone first, anyway.

“Ne, who drove the car here?”

Bou-san looked at me, shocked.

“You cannot possibly have dementia, can you? Of course I drove it!”

“Then what about the other car?”

Bou-san wrinkled his brow; beside him, John smiled.

“It was me, Mai.” (Originally Bou-san drove one car, and the other was driven by Lin.) “John, you know how to drive?”

John’s expression immediately turned rather strange.

“Ur—it looks like I do – I know!”

“Mai, are you alright? You’ve completely blanked out, haven’t you?”

“Of course not, I’ve only forgotten.”

“Are you having a fever?”

– Of – course – not! I’ve only made a small mistake.

I looked out of the window once more.

– Right, the cars were driven by Bou-san and John.

Ah—ah, what is wrong with me, how can I be this strange?

“Ne, Mai-nee-san!”

Mariko pulled my hand.

“Tsumura dropped his money.”

“Money? Where did he drop it?”

Tsumura looked like he was about to cry.

“The second floor; I saved for a very long time, there is $500.”

“Ah—that really is unlucky.”

Takaru said, tilting his head.

“I think I dropped it at the turn at the entrance to the second floor.”

“Can I go look for it?”

“Ah – of course, I’ll go with you guys.”

“Mai!”

With a bang, Naru’s voice intruded.

“Don’t wander off by yourself!”

“It’s just for a little while!”

“You’re not allowed to!”

– Whatever, that miser—

“I’ll go with you guys as well!”

Masako said.

Tsumura stared unblinkingly at Masako and shook his head.

“No need, I’ll look for my things myself.”

“But it’ll be very dangerous all by yourself.”

“You really don’t need to; I’ll be fine by myself.”

“It’s no matter to me, but for the money you saved so hard by yourself to be picked up by someone else—”

“No!”

– Ya ne ya ne

“Tsumura!”

Naru doesn’t even know to be gentle when speaking to children.

“This place is very dangerous; you’re not allowed to wander around by yourself.”

“I want to go!”

“It’s no use crying!”

“Nee-san and Takaru will go with me!”

“No!”

Tsumura started crying immediately.

“Ne, we’re just going up a little!”

“Do you have the ability to protect the children?”

– I don’t – (He hit the nail on the head) “I’ll go too! Do you want me to go with you all?”

Masako said, kneeling beside Tsumura.

“I don’t want!”

“You cannot be stubborn! You can see it is dark outside already. If only children go, it will be very dangerous, right? So nee-san will bring you herself, is that alright?”

“—Just Masako-nee-san?”

“Yeah, just me.”

“Then—if it’s just nee-san alone it’ll be alright.”

“But we’re only going to the entrance on the second floor, ok? Even if there isn’t anything there we have to come back, do you understand?”

“I’m coming as well,” Bou-san said, standing up.

“No way! I only want Masako-nee-san to come, just nee-san! We’ve already agreed on it just now, I don’t want other people!”

“Ok, ok, ok!”

Bou-san smiled bitterly, then tossed the lighter to Masako.

“Here!”

“Thanks, come, let’s go, Tsumura.”

“Yeah!”

Masako held Tsumura’s hand and ascended the stairs. The child appeared very happy. Takaru and Mariko also went along. It was already dark inside the school compound, so when she went up the stairs, Masako lit the lighter; illuminated by the orange light, Masako’s face flashed past, across the stage. For some reason, I could not shift my gaze, and followed her closely. At the same time, my hands clasped each other tightly.

– Why was I like this? I felt really uneasy!

The dim light of dusk flickered on the walls of the stage, swaying interchangeably with the shadows. Why did it look like the glow from a flame? Why did it flicker so disturbingly? Besides me, Naru and Bou-san also starred in the direction of the staircase.

– Found it! – upon hearing the sound, I relaxed a little. The light intensified, then weakened. The orange glow illuminated, and the shadows of the descending people swayed with it.

Great, everyone returned together.

Letting out a held breath, I watched the 4 children who descended from the staircase.

For some strange reason, that uneasy feeling returned once more.

2

The rain was still pouring; outside, the school was completely engulfed in darkness. The bonfire burning in the vestibule was the only source of light; as it was not very large, it did not illuminate the entire area. The corners of the school, the area by the stairs – were all completely dark.

I huddled near the bonfire, and looked repeatedly towards the figures gathered by the bonfire. Naru, Bou-san, John, and the 4 children: Mariko, Tsumura, Takaru, and Takami?(鹿実) (the child who substituted Masako) – Clearly no one had gone missing, but why did I feel like this feeling wasn't the least bit reliable?

"Let's clean up (tl/n: spiritually, not physically) the classrooms one by one, except for the inner-most classroom."

"It looks like that's all we can do."

"The problem is what to do with these children?"

"Indeed, and neither do we want to divide our energies. Do we go all together?"

"There is a little problem here."

"Only either myself or Takigawa-san can stay behind, but Takigawa-san is more suited than myself for jobs like sealing the classrooms."

"I'm not too confident with Naru and myself."

"We'll find a way."

Bou-san looked at Naru.

"You'll find a way? What about exorcism?"

"If it doesn't work, at the key moment there'll always be a way."

“Don’t joke. We’d be in trouble if you were to do anything.”

– These words sounded somewhat familiar. A long time ago, who was it who said something similar, but Naru still criticized him? – It was probably Bou-san – “There is no way to call for an ambulance.”

“Indeed, Shibuya-san.”

Although Naru knows Qi-gong, with Naru’s frail physique, and his long recovery and recent discharge from hospital, we couldn’t risk repeating the same mistake.

“John, will you be fine here by yourself?”

“No problem.”

“Mai, come with us.”

“Yeah, if I can be of any help.”

“Just don’t make trouble for Naru, Ok?”

“Wu—it looks like—”

I felt uneasy – could I do it?

“Then that’s decided! John, the children are in your care then.”

“Let’s go.”

First, we went up to the second floor with John and the children awaiting orders at the entrance to the second floor. When we reached to turn at the second floor, I turned back to glance at John.

Entering the nearest classroom, Bou-san started his ritual, cleaning out all the spirits in the room with a spell to seal the room. When we left the seventh classroom, I asked, “Ne, do you feel you can do it?”

Bou-san could not see in the darkness, neither could he carelessly use the lighter, as the oil in it was nearly all gone. (tl/n: this is strange, since Masako disappeared with the lighter – and this is mentioned specifically later on in the text as well.) “I don’t know. Somehow I feel that I haven’t felt it, and there wasn’t any reaction whatsoever. – Mai, do you feel anything?”

“Bou-san, I’m still awake right now!”

“Right, it’s rather troublesome for you to use your powers.”

“That can’t be helped. It’s not my fault.”

“Then please, whatever happens, do your best! Because you’re the only one with the ability to see spirits.”

I suddenly stopped in my tracks.

“What’s up?”

“It’s like – it’s like there’s something really strange –”

“What? – We’re about to go back.”

“Up till now how have we exorcised spirits?”

“What do you mean by how we exorcise spirits?”

“It’s not convenient for Naru or me to use our powers. Then up till now, how did you and John do it? I feel it’s rather strange, even if I’m asking only at this point…”

“Ah, this – that we’ve really been doing up till now.”

“But you and John are not able to see spirits are you?”

When he heard that, Bou-san immediately replied.

“How is it you’re suddenly paying attention?”

“Because it’s very strange. Could it really be that the assignation of jobs between psychics has really been this difficult?”

“Assignation? I say, you fellow, hey!” This was Bou-san’s voice.

“It is indeed such – how have we managed our manpower for so long –” Naru spoke too.

Gradually, I felt unease spread from under my feet.

“Let’s go back, I’m worried that something has happened on John’s side.”

3

Reaching the stairs, the pale light at the entry could be seen – there were 5 figures there.

I stopped momentarily, what if the already missing door had been closed, what if someone wasn't there when we opened the door…?

Going down one flight of stairs, the light from the bonfire was visible. The light which illuminated the stage walls was extremely dim. However, my eyes, used to darkness, found this extremely bright.

5 figures lifted their heads to look towards us: all of them were small – 5 children.

Mariko, Tsumura, Takaru, Takami, and Ai (John had been substituted) What a relief, I was worried to death – the children – Just as I was about to step forward, I stopped.

"Wait!"

Bou-san and Naru turned.

– As expected, there was something rather strange.

Because we couldn't just be left with children. At least, at least either Bou-san or I would have stayed behind, because leaving the children alone would be impossible with Naru's personality.

I reached out and grasped Bou-san's and Naru's sleeves tightly.

"Ne! Go back!"

I stepped backwards while pulling the pair of them.

"Hey! Mai!"

"What's up?"

“It’s strange—”

The children looked at us without making a sound.

(Ai—) (tl/n: the child’s name, not a sigh) “Strange? What is strange?”

“It really is strange; there definitely must be some mistake!”

“What is strange, you fellow!?”

“Do my instincts not count? – Ne! Go back!”

“Then what about the children?”

Momentarily, the children’s gazes met mine.

“Please, go back!”

“Mai!”

(Two vehicles—)

“Mai!”

(Two vehicles—)

My heart started screaming loudly.

“Why, why would there be two vehicles?”

“This—”

“Bou-san drove one of the vehicles, then who drove the other one?!”

Ha! I let out a breathe, I had finally expressed my feelings.

“Neither Naru nor I have a license!”

Suddenly, Naru grabbed my hand and dragged me along, as though we were escaping from something.

“Come, Mai! Bou-san, follow up!”

Bou-san responded, immediately grabbing me and running upwards. The sound came like pistol shots.

“归**命！普遍！**诸**金**刚**！暴**恶**魔障！**”(tl/n: same chant as in chapter 5) The children gathered around the doorway immediately flew over.

The children's bodies stretched like rubber and rushed towards us, grabbing Bou-san, who immediately turned into a black shape.

"Bou-san!"

It was as though the darkness around us turned viscous, coiling stickily around Bou-san, engulfing him.

"Naru!"

Bou-san threw something over, which landed by my feet – it flashed a pale gold in the darkness.

—It was a vajra(独钴杵), which I picked up immediately.

"Bou-san!"

I shrugged off Naru's hand, held the vajra and formed the Acalanatha seal.

"归命！普遍！诸金刚！暴恶魔障！"(tl/n: same chant yet again) Following that I formed the sword seal with my fingers, and started making the nine cuts.

"Rin (臨), Pyō (兵), Tō (闘), Sha (者), Kai (皆), Jin (陣), Retsu (列), Zai (在), Zen (前)!"

And I slashed straight down the center.

– It was already late; when I let out my breath, Bou-san's body had already completely swallowed by the darkness.

"Come here, Mai!"

This time I could only grab his hand and escape first.

4

Naru and I escaped into the nearest classroom, which was a place that had been cleansed by Bou-san previously. It should be safe for the time being, at least.

Once I stepped into the classroom, I collapsed immediately onto the floor. I clutched the vajra in my hand, and hugged myself tightly; tears flowed uncontrollably down.

“What should we do…?”

Even though I already knew it was a hopeless situation…

“What should we do…?”

Naru’s cool voice resounded,

“Who was that person? There should be another person who can drive for it to be right, because we have two vehicles. That person should be with those children; we cannot leave the children alone.”

“Yes, but why? Do you mean to say we’ve forgotten about the existence of that person?”

“—it looks to be like that.”

We still had another companion. – I started searching the depths of my memory.

But I felt there was a fog blocking it, making me unable to see clearly. I could only feel that for a long time we’ve been working together with somebody, gathering experiences together, arguing and laughing together.

“We accepted the Village Chief’s request to come here to perform exorcisms, and then we met the children on the way and requested that they show us the

way. In the end all of us were sealed in together—”

“It looks like that’s what happened—”

“Although it appears like we’ve left the five children alone and gone off to perform exorcisms, this is not possible. In reality there should be still one person left behind.”

“Yeah, that is definitely the case. That we just left the children alone is a completely ridiculous idea, it’s definitely impossible that we’ve done that.”

“If that’s the case, then I think that other person should have some rather incredible powers, someone who is at least around the level of a monk. He should be staying with the children.”

“That should be the case.”

“Can that person drive—?”

Naru’s voice suddenly triggered my memory.

(It’s me)

The voice that awakened had a different tone, he appeared to have a Kansai accent.

“—it’s John!”

“Right – the one left behind is John.”

“But—wait, does John know how to drive? I feel like I’ve remembered something wrongly.”

“Didn’t you just say it yourself?”

“I said it – but I feel like there’s still something else.”

“If it is as we thought, there are 5 children below. Things like, ‘John knows how to drive’, can John himself, you and I believe that?”

“Indeed”, Naru said softly.

“There are a total of 8 people in our party, inferring from the number of cups there are.”

“—Yeah.”

“But there are 5 children downstairs. You and I and the monk make 3, making a total of 8. If we add John, then there are too many.”

“Yeah – that’s true.”

“If that’s the case, then John is very likely to have been substituted for the children downstairs.”

– Indeed, John and 4 children stayed downstairs, and then the children found a way to make John vanish, then use another child to substitute his presence.

“But—if that’s the case—”

“Yes—if that’s the case, it probably isn’t John alone who had disappeared, there’re still 5 others who have been substituted by that group of children.”

“– Ah!”

“We were a party of 8, without a single child. Of our party, 5 people have been substituted—”

Myself, Naru, Bou-san, and amongst the 5, there was John and— “—Masako and Ayako.”

“Yasuhara and Lin.”

– So that was the truth: Masako, who vanished with the lighter; Yasuhara, who was engulfed in flames in the classroom; Lin-san, who vanished in the corridor; and that malicious prank, ‘Congratulations, Ayako-san!’…

“—It’s Kirishima Hiroki (?)(桐島裕紀)!”

Naru suddenly spoke.

“—Who?”

“Didn’t you see the photocopy of the newspaper? It’s the name of the teacher who died.”

“What about Kirishima-sensei?”

“He is the source of the phenomenon that we are in now. The person pulling the strings behind the scene is Kirishima. There isn’t any other possibility. If there were only the children, would they do this kind of thing? To set a trap and make us vanish one by one; and to make us lower our guard, send the children one by

one into our company? This is definitely not the will of the children, nor should it be a plan that can be made by a child. – It is controlled by Kirishima behind the scenes.”

“Kirishima-sensei – then does that mean the epicenter is the teacher’s tea room?”

“It’s very dangerous to decide on that immediately like that. Anyhow, the probability of it being on the first floor is very high. If we want to catch him, he’s probably in the commonly used classroom or tea room.”

“Yeah—”

If we were to perform an exorcism in either location—but, how should we do it?

This, I definitely could not allow Naru to perform, although I did not think I could do it myself.

“—we can only choose between you and me to do it.”

“I can’t let Naru do it!”

“Then Mai, you want to try?”

“You think that—I, I can do it?”

“Exorcism is indeed very difficult.”

– As expected!

“Persuade him!”

“—Ai?”

“Go and persuade Kirishima. I can’t communicate with spirits. If it’s you there’s a possibility that it can be done.”

“Persuade him? Can I do that?”

The moment this sentence left my mouth I could feel the person beside me laugh.

“Yes, if you use the temper you usually use to scold me.”

– Ha?

“Then let me try!”

“Let’s go to the first floor. It’s easier to link with the spirits there. I’ll use a signal to help you enter a spirit state.”

“Spirit state?”

“It’s a state where it is easier to find spirits. Mediums and other (psychic users) go into this state during summoning.”

“—Got it.”

I felt Naru’s hand touch my wrist. His hand reached out and clasped my palm. Although the surroundings were chilly, the hand that held me was warm.

“Let’s go down. Don’t let go!”

“Yeah!”

Hand in hand, the two of us stood up. The vajra held in my right hand reminded me – “Ne, do you think everyone will be alright?”

Naru replied in a low tone,

“This, I don’t know either.”

“This is for you.”

I handed the Vajra in Naru’s direction. Naru’s right hand continued holding me, his other hand reached out to receive the Vajra.

“What—?”

He couldn’t tell from feeling it.

“It was Bou-san’s. He threw it to Naru just now.”

Naru took the Vajra.

“—Is that so?!”

“What?”

“Nothing much, it looks like I’ve underestimated Bou-san!”

– Whatever.

“We can still make it!”

“Ai?”

“Anyway, let’s go to the first floor first.”

“—Yeah!”

5

Hand in hand, the two of us descended the stairs. Within the school, no sound could be heard, not even the rain. The rain had probably already ceased.

Only the sound of our own footsteps could be heard echoing behind us. On the way down to the first floor, I suddenly felt that the school was filled with an intense loneliness. Fingers touching the wall, I inhaled and exhaled deeply.

Naru was the first to pass through the small door. After that, just as I was about to leave…

Suddenly, there was a loud noise. In front of me, a dark object hurtled towards me and flashed past my nose. I couldn't help taking a step back. All at once I lost my footing and took a fall.

"Ow oww…"

My waist hit a corner of the stairs. I knew what it was that caused the disturbance.

When I was about to leave, it was like something had collapsed; I was afraid it was the false wall we erected. Soon after, I realized that my hand and Naru's hand had been separated.

"Naru! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine! What about you, Mai?"

It was an extremely vague, muffled voice.

"I'm fine!"

Sitting on the steps I slowly groped my way through the darkness. I knew that the shoe racks had collapsed by the entrance. If only there was the light of a single match for me to see by. If I couldn't find the exit with touch then it'd be

impossible to know if there was a way out.

While looking for the exit, someone touched my hand.

“Can you get out?”

I grabbed Naru’s hand with relief. If his hand could reach in, then the entry wasn’t completely blocked.

“Yeah!”

Pulling the hand that held me, I stood up. The false wall that collapsed shouldn’t have completely blocked the entry. If I carefully stepped a little higher I would be able to get through. Just as I was thinking thus, a hard object hit my forehead. – The false wall?

Hurriedly, I reached out in exploration. It was worse than I had expected. The entry had been blocked. It felt like things were piled in a really complicated manner around the entrance.

“—Wait, wait a moment!”

“What’s up?”

When I heard this voice, I was momentarily stunned. It felt like someone had poured cold water over my head.

Creak! My teeth trembled with cold.

“Mai!”

The sound came from a distance away from me from my lower right. It was as though Naru was at a location where he had already crossed the stage and was about to climb the stairs.

If that was the case—then who was it that held my hand now?

Naru’s hand couldn’t possibly be 2 meters long, it couldn’t possibly be held by me. But who did the hand I was holding on really belong to?

I clearly tried to shrug off that hand, but the hand did not budge. It was like it had been frozen. When I relaxed, that hand gripped my hand’s pressure points even harder.

“—Naru!”

Help! I was unable to say that out loud.

“What’s up?”

The voice was even further away.

– I clearly didn’t take a single step!

I suddenly felt like that hand had started shrinking; I really felt the touch of the hand changing, shrinking further. It turned dry, and very thin – too thin! But it was extremely strong – its sharp claws dug into my skin causing much pain.

I desperately tried to shrug it off, but that bones gripped me tightly. The bones even rattled, but I couldn’t shrug it off.

“Who is it?!”

At this time the darkness swiftly dissolved. Dark figures appeared in front of me, following that they separated and turned into 7 little figures (Naru had vanished). Seven hands grasped my hand.

“Nee-san!”

“What’s up?”

“Did you mistake us for someone else, nee-san?”

While their laughter still reverberated across the stage, I lifted my empty right hand, and started making cuts from the right.

“Rin (臨), Pyō (兵), Tō (闘), Sha (者), Kai (皆), Jin (陣), Retsu (列), Zai (在), Zen (前)!”

At once, the hand holding on to mine relaxed. I shrugged off those fingers immediately and ran towards the second floor. The second floor door was still open, which I hurriedly passed through and ran into a classroom and shut its door. Then I leaned on the classroom door, panting.

I sharpened my ears trying to detect activity outside. There were no footsteps that followed me, and neither could I hear Naru’s voice. There was no noise produced by anything at all. All I could hear was the beating of my heart.

“—Be stronger!”

If I weren’t stronger—right now I was the only one left, there was no one left

at all.

“Calm down!”

Naru, John, Masako, Ayako, Yasuhara, and Lin were all no longer around. (tl/n: missing Bou-san here?) “—What should I do?”

I asked myself. Even if I were the only one, the exorcism still had to be done. Even if I couldn’t exorcise him I still had to persuade him. To worry about how everyone else is, right now, was irrelevant. Right now I should do the work I should do – if I still could not find the others after getting out from this place, then I’d continue looking.

I sat down on the floor.

“Naru isn’t here either—”

There wasn’t anyone who could give me a sign to allow me to enter the spirit state.

“I can only do it myself—”

Sleep! It’ll be fine if I sleep. Even if I can’t sleep I’ll try my best to sleep.

I shut my eyes, and took a deep breath. I tried my best to relax my body.

– No! My body was trembling. Don’t tense up! Relax! Try not to think of anything!

– The more I tried the tenser I got. I kept my eyes shut but without success. I opened my eyes then shut them, shut my eyes then opened them; all I saw was darkness. Memories raced haphazardly through my mind – happy ones, sad ones, scary ones— “One sheep, two sheep…”

Even with counting sheep, my mind could not bring forth the image of a sheep.

“Please! Calm down!”

There was something that appeared to sparkle in the darkness in front of me. I saw it just as I was about to shut my eyes. Taking a deep breath, I looked at it. Somehow I saw it.

I vaguely saw something that had a little red on it. I peeled my eyes: it was a small, red glow. I looked at the red powder floating around the room. Although

the glow was very weak, I actually did see it.

“This—”

I think I’ve seen this color several times before.

“This is Bou-san’s color—”

I rose. Turning back, around the windows and doors, the glowing red powder gathered – pale, little lights; firefly-like.

– This was the trace of Bou-san’s sealing.

“Incredible—it’s too beautiful.”

I stood up. Somehow I felt that my surroundings had a warm feeling.

– I’m not alone. Everyone is protecting me.

At the corner of my vision, I detected a white glow. Below the floor there was a large white glow.

– That was Lin-san’s. It must be Lin-san’s protective seal. It was a seal placed on the first floor, but it actually produced that sort of brightness.

“Following that Masako disappeared on the second floor—”

The entry to the second floor was open.

“Right!”

When I heard this voice I raised my head. Naru stood in front of me.

“Great! I’m finally asleep.”

Naru smiled slightly. It was the gentle smiling face that only appeared in my dreams.

I nodded my head and said,

“Then let us begin!”